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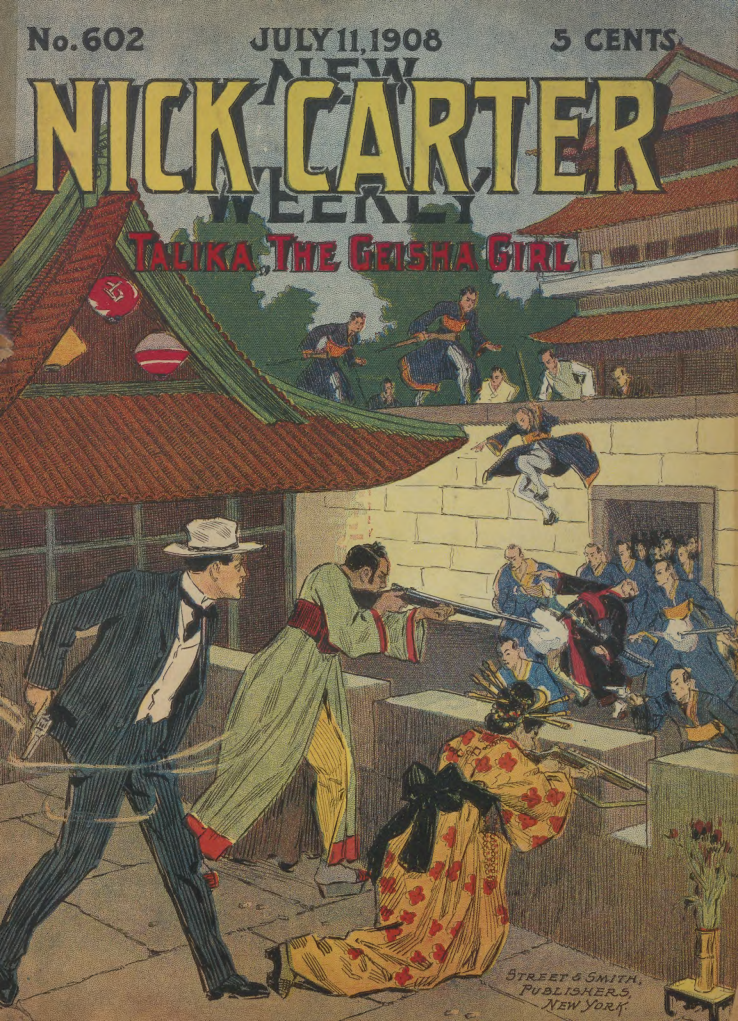
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

TALIKA, THE GEISHA GIRL



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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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TALIKA, THE GEISHA GIRL,

OR,

NICK CARTER'S JAPANESE RIVAL.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERY AT THE GEISHA'S HOUSE.

Nick Carter was awakened in the middle of the forenoon by some one touching him on the forehead, and he started up to find that Tom Harnett was standing over him.

The detective was at the time in Tokio, Japan, where he had already passed a month and a half on business of importance for the Secretary of State of the United States; but that business had been concluded satisfactorily, and Ten-Ichi, a former assistant to the detective and a son of the mikado's, whom the detective had found in Japan after a separation of more than two years, had been sent with Nick's report to Washington. The young prince, who was soon to be publicly acknowledged as such, had also carried a personal letter written in the emperor's own hand to the President of the United States, in which was made clear all that the detective had asserted in his report.

In effect, the result of the detective's mission to that country was, or would soon be, to establish lasting peace between the two nations; a peace that had long been threatened by the jingoes of both countries.*

The case had closed with an interview between the detective and the mikado, at which Ten-Ichi was also present, and at the end of it Ten-Ichi had gone to make ready for his trip to the United States, while Nick, worn out by the exertions of two successive nights, had repaired to a room that the emperor insisted upon his occupying in the palace, in his own private suite, there to make up for the sleep he had lost, and to obtain the rest of which he stood so greatly in need.

It had been near five in the morning when he got into the bed that the emperor placed at his disposal, and when he was awakened so suddenly it seemed to him that he had not been sleeping more than ten minutes, so soundly had he slumbered.

It should be said right here that in prosecuting the case he had just concluded, Nick had been greatly aided by the man who now stood beside him, who was an Englishman born in Japan, and who had never seen the country of his fathers; and also by a beautiful geisha

*See No. 601.

girl—one who was known among the Nipponese as the queen of the geishas—named Talika.

Talika had been known to the detective on a former visit to the country, and he had readily accepted her aid; but in making use of it he had incurred the jealous rage of a certain general, one Maoki, who had threatened both him and her, more than once, and who had once sought to have the detective assassinated in the streets of Tokio.

When Nick and Harnett had parted after the incidents of the preceding night, the latter to his home, and the former to go to the mikado in company with Ten-Ichi, almost the last thing that Harnett said to Nick was that Talika would now be in serious danger from Maoki; but later the emperor had promised to send for her to come to the palace, and so Nick had retired to his rest without any misgivings concerning her.

Now, as the detective started wide-awake and discovered that it was Harnett who had aroused him, he instantly jumped to the conclusion that it was on Talika's account that the man was there.

In this he was not mistaken, as we shall presently discover.

But it was astounding, also, that Harnett should have been permitted to penetrate the palace-room that Nick was occupying, without having had announcement of his presence sent in ahead of him.

"You?" exclaimed the detective, as he swung out of bed to the floor. "How in the world did you get in?"

"I saw Ten-Ichi at the station. I met him. I told him that I must see you at once, and why; and he gave me an imperial seal to show, which admitted me at once. I directed that I be brought here to you without announcement, and here I am."

"Good. Now what has happened? Of course it is something about Talika?"

"Yes."

"Well, what is it?"

"There is grave cause to believe that she has been murdered, although there is no trace of the body."

For a moment the detective did not respond to this abrupt statement. He was thinking, and after a moment he said, more to himself than to his companion:

"I was a fool to let Maoki go as I did, last night."

"I think so, too, Carter," was the calm reply. "I thought so when you told me what you had done. But you did not realize all the possibilities of such a man as Maoki, while I know him thoroughly. A more dangerous man does not live on this island."

"Humph. Tell me in a few words what you have discovered, and then keep silent while I put on my clothes."

"All right. First I must assure you that no one is aware of what I know, save Ten-Ichi, whom I told as shortly as possible; but he is now on his way to the steamer that is to take him to America."

"Yes. Go on."

"Well, it was daylight when I got home, after leaving you. At first I thought to retire, but I did not feel like it, so I went into the garden——"

"What has all this to do with Talika?"

"Please let me tell the story in my own way. It will not take long."

"Go ahead, then."

"I went into the garden and began to fuss about among my plants—a favorite occupation of mine. But somehow I could not get my mind off the geisha girl, Talika. The more I thought about her the more anxious I became concerning her. I remembered that you had dismissed Maoki after you liberated him, and had told him to go where he pleased and do what he pleased; and it worried me."

"Yes."

"You see, Carter, I realized what Maoki might do under the circumstances. Maddened as he was by what you had done to him; angered by your substitution of yourself for him at the meeting of the society; knowing full well that he could not go back on what you had said in his name and that his life must pay the forfeit if he should tell all the truth about it, I knew that his revenge would turn against Talika, who had refused his bracelet while she accepted yours."

"Yes, yes."

"So presently I threw aside my pruning-shears, called to my wife that I was going out at once, and then I hurried to the house of the geisha girl."

"Well."

"Even when I was mounting the long flight of steps that leads up to it from the street I realized that something had happened there. The outside of the house, even, did not appear as it should have done. I could not describe what the difference was, but there was a difference."

"Premonition," said Nick.

"Doubtless. When I arrived at the door it yielded to my touch. I made the customary alarm, however, but received no response."

"Well?"

"The morning hours are supposed to be sacred to a geisha, so I looked around to discover if I was ob-

served, and then I pushed the door open and entered. You know the room to which it admits one?"

"Yes."

"It was in the utmost disorder. The cushions were thrown about as if a pillow-fight had been indulged in. On many of them there are blood-stains. One of them is so badly torn that the stuffing is scattered all about the floor. There are splotches of blood on the walls in several places. A trail of it led from that room into the one behind it where you took the general last night, after you choked him into insensibility, and before you made up as him, and carted him away to the hotel."

"Get on, Harnett."

"I am doing it as rapidly as I can. Inside the room I have mentioned, on the floor, was one of the sharp swords that Talika uses in her sword-dance. It is stained with blood from hand-guard to point on both sides of the blade."

"Well?"

"A piece of the jacket that Talika wore last night—nearly half of it, in fact, was also in that room on the floor. It had been torn apart, as if by a violent wrench, and by a hand that was blood-stained, for it left its imprint on the cloth."

"Anything more?"

"I found three of the jeweled pins that Talika wore in her hair last night; one of them had the head broken off it. I found the bracelet that you gave to Talika last night crushed into fragments on the floor, but still retaining enough of its original pattern to be recognizable."

"What else?"

"Well, that is all, save that I went through the entire house—at the risk of being myself arrested if I should be discovered there—and nowhere found a sign of Talika, save in her sleeping-room where there was sufficient evidence of violence."

"What was it?"

"Her couch showed that she had retired. The pillow of wood was broken. Articles were thrown hither and thither everywhere. That was all."

"No blood there?"

"No."

"Anything else?"

"I think that is all."

"What about the remaining rooms of the house? How many more are there in the house?"

"Four that I have not mentioned. They had evidently not been disturbed, save that it appeared to me as if things might be missing from two of them."

"What sort of things? What do you mean?"

"Clothing. Jewelry."

"Oh. Well, is that all?"

"Yes. I think it is."

"You say you left the house as you found it?"

"I was careful not to disturb anything. When I came out I started toward the hotel to find you, but saw Ten-Ichi passing in a carriage and hurried after him. I caught him at the station, as I have told you. Then I came here."

"Is there any likelihood that any one else will enter that house before we can get there?"

"None whatever. But for my anxiety which took me there, these facts that I have described would not have been known till to-night, at the time Talika would begin to receive her guests. I am sure of that."

CHAPTER II.

THE CRIME AGAINST TALIKA.

As soon as the detective was dressed he called one of the servants who had been assigned to attend upon him, and gave him a note which he wrote hastily, with instructions that it be delivered to the emperor as soon as he awakened, if he was not already astir.

Then he followed Harnett from the palace and they hastened together toward that section of the city where the house of the geisha girl was located.

There were several people on the street near them as they were about to ascend the long flight of steps, and Harnett caught him by the arm and detained him.

"Wait one moment," he said, "until those people are not observing us. It is not considered the proper thing to enter the home of a geisha at this time of the day."

So they waited with what patience they could, until the coast was clear, and then made the ascent of the steps and entered the house.

Nick Carter paused inside the door, having closed it, and looked around him.

He could determine at once that Harnett had given a very clear account of what he had seen there; but he said nothing, merely studying the aspect of each particular thing, and passing from one to another and so on to the adjoining room where the bloody sword was on the floor, and near it the crushed and broken bracelet that had cost him a pretty penny the preceding day.*

*See No. 601.

He examined the sword with care; the torn piece of Talika's jacket he subjected to a minute inspection; the crushed bracelet he dropped into one of his pockets.

"Wait here," he said to Harnett presently; and he left his companion and went to the other rooms of the house.

Altogether he spent the better part of an hour in his examination, and when he returned to the room where he had left Harnett, he said, after a lengthened pause:

"Harnett, I may be mistaken, but I do not believe that Talika has been murdered. Certainly she was not killed with that sword. I wonder if there is a good analytical chemist in this city who happens to be an authority on human blood."

"Yes; there is. I know such a one. But why?"

"I have an idea that it is not human blood that is scattered so freely around here."

"You have?"

"Yes, the whole appearance of things here is too studied. It is too carefully arranged. It looks to me as if the man who did it was determined to make it appear that Talika was wantonly killed; but that in reality she was not injured at all."

"What makes you think that, Carter?"

"There are several things that suggest that idea."

"Will you tell me what they are?"

"Yes. The blood that is on that sword was smeared upon it, rubbed upon it with the thumb and forefinger of a man's hand. One can tell that at half a glance."

"I did not notice it."

"That is because you are not accustomed to looking into the particulars of such things."

"I suppose so."

"If you should take the trouble to look closely at it you would find that the blood does not come quite to the sharp edge of the blade in places. Near the guard there is a nick in the blade, and the blood has not stained inside that. In two places there are plain evidences of rubbing."

"What else, Mr. Carter?"

"That piece of a jacket could not have been torn in exactly the manner it is, had Talika been wearing it at the time. It is my opinion that it was held in both hands and torn apart by a sheer exertion of strength.

"Again, if she had been wantonly murdered and so much evidence been left here to show that she had been, the body would have been here also.

"Again, there is evidence in the other rooms that articles of wearing apparel have been taken away. I am not familiar with Talika's articles of clothing, but I do remember one gown she sometimes wore beside the one she had on last night. Both are gone.

"Again, she had not retired. Her clothing, in which we last saw her, would be somewhere in her room where she put it when she took it off, if it were a case of murder. The assassin would hardly have dressed the body before taking it away. You see he has forgotten some things."

"Yes, indeed."

"Again, as I have said once already, the whole affair is too studied, too carefully arranged; there is method in it. Where are her maids? There were three, weren't there?"

"Yes. They do not sleep here. She remains entirely alone in the house at night."

"Is that usual?"

"It was always Talika's way."

"The man who was here and who has performed all these little attentions, was, of course, Maoki. You agree with me in that, Harnett?"

"I have not doubted it for an instant. Of course it will be quite another matter to establish the fact."

"Of course."

"But there is the bracelet you gave her. We all know that Maoki is jealous of you."

"Pshaw! That means nothing."

"I suppose," said Harnett, "that Maoki must have come directly here the moment you dismissed him this morning before it was light."

"Without doubt."

"But how do you account for the blood, Mr. Carter?"

"I do not account for it yet; until I find out what sort of blood it is. We will take the sword away with us and carry it to that man you spoke of. Is he far from here?"

"No; quite near."

"Now, what should we do in reference to this matter? In New York I should notify the police and the coroner at once."

"We will notify the police. But I would suggest that before it is done you return to the emperor and relate to him all that we have discovered. That will spare us the cross-examination that would otherwise be imposed upon us, and will avoid the detention that might occur."

"But there is no haste about that if we can get away from the house unseen?"

"No—if we can."

"Why do you say that so strangely, Harnett?"

"Because of an idea that just occurred to me."

"What is it?"

"I was thinking that if your theory is correct and if also Maoki should happen to be on the watch or have a confederate watching for him, he could make it very unpleasant for both of us if we should happen to be seen leaving the house."

"Or if he should have us collared while we were leaving it, eh?"

"Yes."

"The emperor would soon set that to rights."

"Undoubtedly; but it would create delay just the same."

"Well, we won't burn any bridges till we get to them. Come."

"Where?"

"To the man who will analyze this blood."

They were fortunate in getting away from the house without being seen—as they supposed. At all events they were not molested while on their way to the house of the chemist.

Once there the detective exhibited the sword and the jacket, and asked:

"Have you a sure method of determining human blood from the blood of an animal?"

"Yes," was the reply, "if the specimen is not too old when it is brought to me."

"Well, this that I bring to you is not yet hardened, although it is dry."

"So I see. Will you wait here?"

"Yes. How long a time will you require?"

"Half an hour. No more."

In half an hour, true to his word, he came out of his laboratory and announced:

"The blood taken from the piece of a jacket you brought to me is human blood; but that which has been smeared upon the sword is not. I should say that it is the blood of a dog, although I can only be certain that it is the blood of an animal."

"You are positive concerning what you have said about the jacket?"

"Yes."

The detective paid the fee and took his departure. Outside the house Harnett asked him:

"How do you account for the fact that it is human blood on the jacket, Carter?"

"It can only be accounted for in one way," replied the detective, "and that is that just before the jacket was torn the man who tore it was wounded in some manner on his hand. Ah! I think I have it."

"Tell me."

"You remember the long pin that had the head broken off?"

"Yes."

"There was some blood on the point of that, too, I remember. I had forgotten it for the moment."

"What of it?"

"It suggests to me that Talika pulled that pin from her hair, and before her assailant could overcome her, she succeeded in inflicting a deep scratch upon his hand. That would account for it. I had forgotten that the geisha girls do not take 'down' their hair when they retire. That is why they rest their heads upon a wooden pillow, isn't it? A sort of an arrangement like a miniature saw-horse?"

"Yes."

"So you see the pin must have still been in her hair. Probably she tried to stab her assailant with it—and scratched him."

"It may be so."

"Hello! Who is that coming toward us, Harnett?"

Harnett looked and then uttered an exclamation.

"We were seen at the house of the geisha," he said. "There is no doubt of it."

"Eh? Somebody coming to arrest us?"

"Yes."

"What shall we do? Submit?"

"It is the only thing to do here in this country."

"Oh; all right. Will you do the talking, or shall I?"

"You had better let me do it, Carter."

"Very well; only make it plain that I am at the present moment a guest of the mikado. It will at least give them something to think about, and to investigate."

"Sure."

"What will be done with us? The first thing, I mean."

"We will be taken to the officer who happens to be in command. But leave all that to me. I will answer questions. Only I will bet you one thing, Carter."

"What is that?"

"I'll wager that you will be charged with the murder, and that your accuser will be no less a person than General Maoki himself."

"Do you think he would have the face—and the courage to do that, when there isn't a particle of doubt that he is himself the guilty person; guilty of whatever wrong has been done, eh?"

"I haven't a doubt of it."

CHAPTER III.

THE DETECTIVE UNDER ARREST.

They were placed under arrest with very little ceremony and marched off to the place at which they were to be detained.

It so happened that their way took them past the house of the geisha, and Nick saw that officers were already in possession of it. He was very glad indeed that he had been permitted to make his own investigations before things were disturbed there.

As Harnett had prophesied, almost the first face they saw when the charge was made against them was Maoki's, who leered in sullen fury at the detective as he was brought forward to the desk and the charge against him was made by the officer who made the arrest.

"What have you to say?" Nick was asked at once.

"Not guilty," he replied.

"Why were you at the house of the geisha, then? You were seen to enter there; you are known to have remained there some time in company with this man," pointing toward Harnett.

"I had been informed that a crime had supposedly been committed at that house, and being a detective in my own country, as well as entertaining some friendship for Talika, the geisha, I went there to investigate."

"Indeed. Who gave you the information you speak of?"

"This gentleman at my side."

"Where did he obtain it?"

"Let him answer for himself, if you please. Let him also state where he found me when he came to bring me the information."

"You may tell where that was."

"At the palace."

"What palace? What palace do you mean?"

"The same palace at which the emperor is at present residing. I was his guest. I am so still. I do not think that his majesty will approve of this arrest."

There was some consternation in the face of the official at this statement; but plainly he did not believe it, for he smiled derisively, and Maoki was heard to laugh audibly.

"The murderer—if there be one—is the man who just laughed," said Nick boldly.

"General Maoki?" Even the judge smiled. "Why do you lie to me about being the guest of the emperor? Do you suppose it will help you to do so? Have you supposed that such a story would be believed?"

"If you will send one of your men to the palace with a message from me, you will soon discover whether it will help me or not," responded the detective.

"We are not in the habit of sending out messengers for criminals."

"No?"

"When did you last see the geisha girl who is called Talika?"

"About half-past eleven o'clock last night; from that to a quarter of twelve."

"Where?"

"At her house."

"Were you alone with her?"

"No."

"Who was with you?"

"This gentleman beside me was present; and a scoundrel named General Maoki was also there."

"Beware, sir, how you insult an officer of the Japanese army."

"That man insults the army by the presence of his name on the roll."

"Beware, sir, I say."

"Rather, your honor, give the advice to him. I do not need it, as you will presently discover."

"You are impertinent."

"Without intention, believe me, sir. But I have committed no fault, while I know that the person to whom reference has been made has done so."

"Where did you go after you left the house of the geisha?"

"I will not reply to that question at present, with your permission, sir."

"Did you go alone?"

"No."

"Who went with you?"

"General Maoki and this gentleman."

"It is known where this gentleman and the general were after midnight last night; do you wish me to understand that you were with them?"

"I do not wish at present that you should understand anything at all about my movements after midnight last night, sir."

"Very likely not. Did you return to the house of the geisha?"

"I did not."

"Or see her again?"

"No."

"You have even now in your possession, wrapped in cloths, a sword that belonged to Talika; is it not true?"

"Yes."

"And what else?"

"A piece of a jacket she was wearing when I saw her last night."

"You were engaged in removing them from the house, as being evidence against you, when——"

"One moment, sir, if you please. I was not doing any such thing."

"What, then, were you doing with those articles?"

"I had taken them to a man named Susanshu, for examination."

"For what purpose?"

"To determine if the blood upon them was human blood—or otherwise."

"Did you not *know?*"

"If I had known I would not have gone to Susanshu."

"What did he tell you?"

"That the blood on the jacket is human blood and that the blood on the sword came from an animal—probably a dog. It is my own opinion that the blood on the jacket came from something far worse and lower in the scale of creation than a dog."

"From what, then?"

"From the hand of General Maoki. If you will examine it you will find that it is badly scratched across, where Talika wounded him with a pin from her hair when he attacked her."

A growl of rage came from the general, who now thrust himself forward until he stood almost within reach of the detective.

"It is true that I have such a wound upon my hand," he exclaimed, "but it was made in the presence of this person; not as he states."

"I believe you, general. Step back, if you please," replied the judge. To Nick Carter he added:

"I shall charge you with the murder of Talika, the geisha, and commit you for trial. And now, you, Harnett. What have you to say for yourself? How do you explain your presence at the house of the geisha with this man? You, who know that you had no right there, and should not have gone under any circumstances?"

"First, sir, I assert that Mr. Carter has spoken the entire truth, for I——"

"What! You defend him? You?"

"I speak the truth. He did not know that a crime had been committed until I went to him at the palace, awakened him and——"

"Do you also insist upon that palace story, Harnett?"

"Yes."

"But it is incredible."

"It is nevertheless true, sir. If you will glance at this seal, it will convince you."

Harnett put one hand in his pocket and drew forth an article that looked like a gold medal—the one that Ten-Ichi had given him with which to pass him to the bedside of the detective. It will be recalled that he had already told Nick about it.

The judge gazed upon it with considerable awe. Then he asked in a milder tone:

"Where did you obtain this?"

"It was given to me by the young prince Ten-Ichi, and for the purpose that I have already mentioned."

"To enable you to make your way to this man, whom you claim was sleeping at the palace?"

"Yes."

"Why did you go there after him—if he *was* there?"

"To inform him of the discovery I had made at the house of the geisha."

"Do you yourself mean to assert that you had already been to that house of the geisha?"

"I do."

"This morning?"

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

"Because I had been uneasy about her. I knew that her life was in danger and I had misgivings concerning her."

"That is not a plausible story at all. You knew perfectly well that if you had occasion to visit the house of the geisha at this hour of the day, it was your duty to come here and obtain permission and an escort."

"It is true, but I did not think of it."

"Do you insist that this man did not know that a crime had been committed until you told him about it?"

"I do."

"General Maoki, what is your story as to that?"

"That the crime was committed before Harnett went to the geisha's house at all; that the man who calls himself variously Carver, and Carter, visited it at or near three o'clock this morning and then committed the crime. If he was afterward found at the palace, it was by some trickery that he got there, not by fair means."

"How do you know that he was at the house of the geisha at three this morning?"

"He was seen to enter it stealthily."

"And positively recognized?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"By one of the soldiers who serves under me; this man here;" and he thrust a man forward before him.

"Do you substantiate the assertion of your commanding officer?" asked the judge.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see the man now under arrest enter the house at or near three o'clock this morning, of a certainty?"

"I did."

"Did you wait for him to come out again?"

"I did."

"How long was he there, inside the house, at that time?"

"Almost an hour, sir."

"You take oath to that?"

"I do."

CHAPTER IV.

THE ESCAPE OF THE REAL CRIMINAL.

What action the judge might have taken then will never be known, for to the surprise of all an officer of the Palace Guards entered the room at that moment. He was accompanied by two of his men and the three strode up the center aisle until they were almost at the desk when the officer stopped and saluted:

"By command of the mikado," he said simply; and instantly every person in that room who was seated rose to his feet, and then inclined their bodies forward almost as if in prayer. Even the judge on the bench was not exempt from this.

The officer continued:

"It has been called to the attention of the mikado that an American gentleman who is now an honored guest at the palace of his august majesty was seen on the streets of the city a little while since, under police escort; that the gentleman was brought to this court; that in company with the gentleman was one Harnett, a subject of the mikado who had called at the palace this morning. It is commanded that these men be instantly released, and that the officers who caused their arrest be detained by this court until such time as the reason for the outrage may be investigated."

The officer had uttered the words in rather a singsong voice, but now he turned at once and saluted Nick Carter, and said:

"I believe I have the honor to address Mr. Carter?"

"Yes," replied Nick.

"And you are Harnett?" he asked of Nick's friend.

"Yes."

"You are at liberty, gentlemen. Mr. Carter, my august master desires your presence at the palace as soon as it may be convenient, but I was directed to say that there is no haste if other matters are demanding your attention. Do you desire the punishment of the men who caused the arrest, Mr. Carter?"

"No; only there is one who should be detained. He is——"

Nick had turned while he was speaking, and he stopped suddenly; then he smiled and added:

"He is not here, I perceive."

"Do you mean that he has fled?"

"Yes."

"Since my entrance?"

"Yes."

"His name, if you please, if you know him?"

"General Maoki."

"General Maoki! Is it possible?"

"Quite so."

"The general is an officer high in the army, sir, and has a great following. Are you very sure that he should be detained?"

"I am so sure of it that I would stake my life upon it."

The officer turned to the judge and said:

"You will see to it, sir, that General Maoki is found at once; that wherever found he is placed under arrest by the order of the mikado, and detained in your charge until further orders concerning him is received."

It was less than half an hour after that when Nick Carter, with Harnett, entered the presence of the emperor.

"What is this rumor that has reached me in regard to the geisha?" his majesty asked at once.

Nick told him, relating everything that had occurred from the moment he was roused from sleep by Harnett.

"Now tell me something of the events which led up to all that," directed the emperor.

"Your majesty is already aware of the reasons for my presence in Japan," replied Nick. "I have related to you the fact that in pursuing my matters to fulfilment, I obtained the very valuable aid of this gentleman and also that of Talika, the geisha."

"Yes."

"I will explain to your majesty that in securing the services of the geisha I had no thought of them until I was taken into her presence at her house two nights ago and discovered that she was one with whom Ten-Ichi had made me acquainted when I had the good fortune to serve your majesty before the commencement of the war with Russia."

The mikado inclined his head in assent.

"On that occasion she recognized me, although I was in disguise. General Maoki was among her guests. We had some talk together, and when it was time to depart the geisha requested me to remain. I was told at the time that the fact would anger the general, but I paid no attention to it. It resulted, however, in an attempt to assassinate me that same night, as I was returning to my hotel from the geisha's house." *

"Yes."

"It became my duty to present the geisha with a bracelet the following evening; but during the day I received a letter from her, telling me that General Maoki had threatened me with death if she clasped it on her arm or permitted me to do so. Mr. Harnett has seen and read the letter."

"Very well. Please continue, Mr. Carter. I was not aware of these details."

"I returned a letter to Talika in which I told her that I would nevertheless present the bracelet, and that I would also clasp it on her arm—by force, if necessary. Of course that was said only by way of emphasis."

"I understand."

"I did present her with the bracelet; I did clasp it on her arm. When the guests were departing from her house and Harnett and I were requested to remain, General Maoki remained also, and then in the presence of both Harnett and myself he insulted her.

"I seized him and choked him into insensibility. I carried him to a rear room, asking Harnett and the geisha to remain where they were till I returned. In that adjoining room I removed his outer clothing and put it on myself; I also made my face up to represent him; I drugged him so that he would sleep. After that, with the assistance of Harnett, I conveyed Maoki to my hotel and locked him in my room. He was unconscious."

"Yes. Go on, please."

"Then, in company with Harnett, I attended the meeting of the society, as your majesty knows, where I represented General Maoki and made a speech in his name.

"When we left the society, I returned at once to my hotel and set Maoki at liberty, after which I joined Ten-Ichi, where, with Harnett, he was awaiting me, and we came directly to your majesty's presence."

"All that is very clear indeed. And now it is your opinion——"

"It is my opinion that Maoki, as soon as I set him free, descended upon the house of the geisha and stole her away. I do not believe he has murdered her; I believe that he has only made it appear so, with the idea that he could charge me with the crime. I believe that he has taken her somewhere a captive, and that he is now holding her."

"And has not Maoki been arrested?"

"He escaped from the court-room, your majesty."

"And is at liberty?"

"Yes."

"Well, Mr. Carter, until you have settled up the mystery surrounding Talika I will not interfere with your time and your occupations. I will direct the premier at once to invest you with such authority as you may require, and I sincerely hope that you may discover that Talika has not been injured."

"I thank your majesty."

"In the meantime I have directed that your belongings be brought from the hotel to the palace. You will occupy the suite of rooms that adjoins Ten-Ichi's, which I believe are not unfamiliar to you."

As soon as Nick and Harnett were outside on the streets of the city again, the detective said to his friend:

"I want you to take me now, at once, to your father-in-law; to General Lakatira."

"Do you believe that he can help you?"

"I hope so. At least he can give me some information about Maoki: some general information, I mean. They have known each other a long time, haven't they?"

"Always."

"By the way, does General Lakatira know of the deception that was practised last night in regard to Maoki, when I represented him at the society?"

"No. Certainly not. No one knows about it but the mikado, Ten-Ichi, Talika, you, and I, and Maoki himself."

"Humph!" said Nick. "The thing may prove an alibi for him unless the secret is revealed, don't you think?"

"I have thought about it; yes."

*See No. 601.

"Well, let us find General Lakatira."

They found the general at his residence, and as there existed a warm feeling of friendship between him and the detective, the greeting was cordial.

"General," said Nick, plunging at once into the subject, "I find myself to-day acting under the direct instructions of the mikado, and in that capacity I have found it necessary to apply to you for certain information which I have no doubt you can give me."

"If there is anything that I can do to assist you, you may be sure I will do it gladly," was the smiling reply.

"First, have you heard the news about the beautiful geisha?"

"Yes. It was just told to me. Who could have done it?"

"Of course, sir, it is not certain who has done it. Neither is it at all certain that she is dead. It is my own belief that she has not been injured. I think she has merely been carried away by a certain general of the army who was known to be in love with her."

"Do you refer to Maoki?"

"Yes."

"I hardly think it possible that he would dare to do such a thing."

"Possibly not; and yet it is my belief. I happen to know that he had already made all arrangements to have *you* assassinated, general." *

"To have *me* assassinated?"

"Yes. But we need not dwell upon that since at the present moment he is a fugitive. The mikado has ordered his arrest. I am seeking him. I wish you to aid me in so far as answering some questions concerning him that I will ask you."

"Why, I know next to nothing about him."

"Let me ask you two questions: Where, in your opinion, could the man escape to, as he has done, with the hope of remaining hidden for any length of time? And where could he have taken Talika, the beautiful geisha?"

"Ah; those questions are too much for me. Maoki is a rich man with a powerful personal following. He owns extensive estates among the mountains of Naganoken; he owns a large island called Miyaki, a hundred miles off the southern shore, and he has other estates in Kazusa, which is across Tokio bay."

"That is much nearer, isn't it? We will try that first, if you think it wise. How should I proceed to get there?"

"By train to Yokusuka, and by boat across the neck of the bay."

"Good. Now tell me something about the place itself, please."

CHAPTER V.

GETTING ON THE TRAIL.

General Lakatira was silent a considerable time before he replied to the request of the detective, and Nick knew he was thinking deeply; he was bending his mind to the task that had been given him in the effort to conjecture as nearly as possible from what he knew of the habits and hobbies of Maoki, where the man would go under the pressing emergency that had so suddenly come upon him.

When he did reply it was with great caution. He said:

"Of course, sir, you understand that this is purely guesswork on my part?"

"Certainly."

"I have no means of knowing where Maoki could have gone. I can only conjecture about it by putting myself for the moment in his place and considering what I would do under like circumstances."

"Exactly, general."

"Of course you also understand that such circumstances could never exist in my case, for I have always lived a clean life. But supposing I were the villain that I have always considered him to be, what would I do if I had stolen Talika, the geisha, and had been compelled to flee, as in his case?"

"Precisely."

"Now that I have considered the matter and am in part prepared to reply, may I ask you a question or so before I do so?"

"Certainly."

"Have you fixed the hour—the time—when he is supposed to have visited the house of Talika?"

"Only approximately; but we are agreed that it was not far from three o'clock this morning."

"Good. Now—excuse me if I seem to wander from the subject; I am not really doing so at all—as nearly as I can understand the situation you do not believe that Talika has been injured at all?"

"Not seriously, at least."

"But at the same time there was every evidence left at her house to lead to the supposition that she had been murdered?"

"Yes."

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*See No. 691.

"And the object of that appears to be that, having, as he supposed, created that impression, it was his intention to fix the crime, or the supposed crime, upon another; yourself, for instance?"

"That is my theory of the matter, general."

"And in that case would it not be true that he would feel no personal apprehension regarding the matter? I mean that in the beginning he would not consider it necessary that he should personally hide himself away?"

"That is the point."

"He would, in fact, believe—first, that he could convince the people of Tokio that Talika had been murdered; and second, that you, or some other person than himself were responsible for her disappearance. Is that correct?"

"According to my judgment it is."

"Then it would very naturally follow that in taking her away he would select a place quite near to the city in which to conceal her."

"Yes."

"A place to which he could go himself whenever he desired to do so, without attracting too much attention to his absences?"

"Yes."

"Then I unhesitatingly say that the place he has chosen would be his estate in Kazusa, across the bay. I have already mentioned it."

"You have."

"Now, my dear sir, I observe two objections to this surmise which I will explain to you."

"What are they, general?"

"The first, and to me the most important one, is, that in order to have been at the house of the geisha at three o'clock, he must have gone directly there from the meeting of the society which he is known to have attended. The second is that he appeared in person at the court-room at the time of your arrest to give testimony against you, and he would not have had time to have gotten half-way to his estates in Kazusa and return."

Nick Carter smiled, and replied:

"To the first I will say that from a conversation I have had with your son-in-law I am positive that Maoki could have gone to Talika's house after the meeting you mention, and have done what was done there. To the second I reply that it was doubtless a part of his plan to place his captive in charge of one of the faithful followers you have mentioned, who conveyed the girl to Kazusa for him."

"There is an objection to that theory, also."

"What is it?"

"That while Maoki might himself have the hardihood to attack a geisha it would hardly be possible for him to find a man, even among his most loyal followers, who would do so at his command, or who would even lend a hand, as in this case."

"To that I will reply, general, that if among his followers there is one who has committed some crime for which his life is already forfeit, the fear of exposure and the threat that he would be exposed, would drive him to do Maoki's bidding instantly, no matter what it might be."

"I had not thought of that; but I believe you are right. Moreover, I happen to know that Maoki has more than one such man as that in his employ."

"Doubtless it is the kind that he best likes to employ."

"Perhaps that is true."

"At all events, general, I think I shall start at once for the place in Kazusa. The only trouble is that I know nothing about how to find it, or how to recognize it when found."

Harnett interrupted the conversation now for the first time.

"Don't let that worry you, Carter," he said. "I know the place well, and I have already determined to accompany you."

The detective thrust out his hand and silently grasped that of his friend; but as he did so, General Lakatira, who had evidently been puzzled by the name he had just heard, frowned, and, turning sharply upon the detective, he said:

"How is this, sir? My son has just called you by a name to which you replied. It was not the name by which you were introduced to me. Then it was Carver; now it appears to be Carter. Was it a mistake, or was there deception?"

"There was a little of both, general," replied the detective. "Without asking further questions of me concerning it, will you do me the favor to carry a message for me to the mikado, and there listen to the explanation that his august majesty will give to you?"

"The mikado?"

"Yes."

"You are then in the service of his august imperialness?"

"Yes."

"Then I beg your pardon, sir; and I will go to the emperor."

"Thank you. Will you say to the emperor that I beg that he will explain fully to you the details of

my visit here, and tell you the entire story of the history of last night? And say to him that I ask that *he* do it instead of me, because I wish so noble a gentleman as General Lakatira to be taken as closely as possible into the emperor's confidence?"

The general, notwithstanding his sixty years, blushed like a schoolgirl at this compliment, and he lost no time in hurrying away to do as had been suggested. But as he was on the point of passing out, he paused a moment, and said:

"There is one thing that I forgot. There is a train that leaves the station for Yokusuka, which is the point to which Maoki would have sent the girl before crossing the neck of the bay to Kazusa, at four o'clock in the morning. It occurs to me that if the crew of that particular train could be found and questioned, they might have information concerning who traveled by it this morning."

"Thank you, general. It is a good suggestion. I will follow it," replied Nick.

When the detective was again alone with Harnett, he asked his friend:

"Do you know that country over there?"

"Yes. I own property in Kazusa myself. More than that, it adjoins the estates owned by Maoki; only mine is, of course, a very small affair while his estates are large and valuable."

"But you are entirely familiar with the neighborhood?"

"I am that."

"When can we get a train that will take us to Yokusuka?"

"There is one almost every hour through the day."

"Then let us start at once. If there is time for waiting at the station, we will utilize it by making inquiries such as the general suggested when he was departing."

"Ought we not to take a force of men with us?"

"I don't think so, Harnett. They would handicap us and hinder more than help us. They would be noticed and would therefore be in the way; and, besides, my experience has always been that I can work alone, or with one good assistant like yourself, to much better advantage than with many others around me."

"But Maoki will fight if he is cornered."

"All the more reason that we should go alone."

"Why?"

"Because if he is driven to a corner where he shows fight, a hundred men would not avail us, judging from what I have heard. No; we must accomplish whatever is done by strategy rather than by force."

"Come, then. Let us go. Shall we disguise ourselves?"

"No; we will go as we are, with our cards on the table."

They hurried together to the station and discovered that they had a half-hour before their train would start for the coast city of Yokusuka, and Nick was agreeably surprised to find that the conductor of the train was the same one who had had charge of the train that left Tokio at four in the morning.

Calling the man aside before it was time for the start, he showed him the authority that had been given him by the emperor; and then he said:

"I must ask you some questions, which you will answer and as speedily forget all about them."

"I am at your services, exalted one," was the reply.

"How many passengers did you have on your train this morning, when you left here at four o'clock?"

"There were fourteen, not counting those who were in the private car belonging to General Maoki, exalted one."

"Ah! And who were in that car?"

"A party of seven of the general's followers. They were taking a seriously ill boy to the estates of the general in Kazusa, where it was hoped he would be benefited. I was told that the boy was the son of one of the general's officers, exalted one."

"Did you see the boy?"

"Not his face. He was wrapped in blankets. I saw him only as he was carried upon, and then off, the car."

CHAPTER VI.

THE PALACE OF GENERAL MAOKI.

"So, that is the place, is it?"

It was Nick Carter who asked the question. He was standing beside Harnett upon an elevation that overlooked a beautiful valley, in the very center of which were extensive buildings, oddly constructed, for the majority of them were built to the height of one story, of stone, and were finished out with wood.

There were very many of them, too, although the whole lot were joined together, one to another, so that, in fact, they comprised one residence.

In shape they formed exactly a Greek cross, save only that each arm of the cross was tipped with a T. (If the reader will stop a moment and take the

trouble to draw such a cross for himself he will understand exactly what is meant.)

The time was already approaching sunset. In an hour it would be dark.

The two had made the journey from the landing-place at the Kazusa side of the bay, by a roundabout course, and had succeeded in avoiding observation.

"The place looks rather formidable," remarked the detective. "However, I don't suppose it will be difficult to get inside of it."

"Is that your intention? To go inside of it?" asked Harnett.

"Certainly. What did you suppose we came here for?"

"When do you propose to accomplish it?"

"As soon as the night gets dark enough. By the way, do you know anything about the interior of that strange building?"

"Nothing at all. I was never inside of it."

"Well, you know a good deal about Japanese houses, don't you?"

"Naturally."

"Where would you suggest, then, that in such a house as that one a man like Maoki would conceal a prisoner like Talika?"

"I don't know; only on general principles I should say as far from his own living-quarters as possible."

"Where would his own living-quarters be located?"

"At the center of the cross."

"Then you would suggest that she is confined in one of the arms of the cross?"

"Yes; or in one of the T's of the arms."

"Which one, preferably?"

"Well, in a house like that one, the arm that extends toward the east would be used for the idols and gods they worship, and therefore the one extending toward the west would be given over to the use of servants."

"So we have only the north and the south arms to select from?"

"That would be my idea."

"Would there be any choice as between those two, as the most likely place for us to investigate?"

"I don't think so."

The detective took a coin from his pocket and prepared to flip it into the air.

"Here goes for a selection," he said. "Heads, we go first to the north arm; tails, we go first to the south arm."

It was tails.

"That settles that part of it," said Nick, pocketing the coin. "We will tackle first that arm of the Greek cross that extends exactly toward where we are now standing. See, the sun has gone down. In an hour we will make our advance."

"Don't you think, Carter, that it will be a little early? Those who are there in the house—and we must not forget that Maoki is probably there himself now—will not yet have retired for the night."

"Precisely. And do you not realize that if we would save Talika from harm, we must rescue her without a moment of unnecessary delay?"

"I understand you; you are right."

"I have known men like that general before. They make the same sort in some parts of Mexico. Come; let us move forward."

It was not yet nine o'clock when they stood under one of the windows of that south arm of the cross, and Harnett waited while Nick passed along to investigate more closely.

As has been already said, the lower story of the house was made of stone. The windows were also very small, and quite unlike other Japanese houses that Nick had seen, they were protected by iron bars, while at many of them iron shutters were closed on the inside, showing that doubtless all the windows were provided in the same manner.

"It is like a fortress," he remarked, in a whisper, to his companion, when he returned. "I do not just now see any way of entering here."

"It is likely," replied Harnett, "that we will have to make our entrance through the main part—the living part of the house. We will run a risk of discovery there, but I am convinced that it is the only way to get inside."

"Come, then. Let us try. Where should that main entrance be located?"

"Between the bases of the north and the east arms," was the reply.

Here, at once Nick discovered, was the main entrance to the building.

The court that was formed between the angles of the north and east arms of the cross was filled with flowering plants, with paved walks between the beds in which they were blossoming. Beyond there was a wide and deep porch with bronze dragons guarding either side of it.

Still beyond, there was a wide open door which gave upon a spacious corridor that was now dimly lighted by lamps pendent from the high ceilings.

Squatted upon the floor near the entrance, with his knees drawn up to his chin, was a man on guard

whom they at first believed to be sleeping; but as they looked more closely, they could see his eyes twinkling open from time to time as he surveyed his surroundings.

"If we could only induce that chap to move," said Nick thoughtfully.

"Wait," replied Harnett. "I can do that, I think. I know a way; only it will necessitate your entering the house alone and my remaining on the outside; and I don't like that."

"It will be all the better," answered the detective. "With both of us inside, we might both be caught in a trap; with one of us outside, if the other is caught, he will have liberty to do something—the one outside, I mean."

"Shall it be so, then?"

"Yes; but tell me before you go how you propose to call that fellow away from his post."

"It is a weird call that I will make. I have learned to imitate it perfectly. It is named the 'call of the dead,' and is regarded with superstitious terror by the ignorant classes."

"Good. What will the man do when he hears it?"

"You will see him raise his head at first and listen. When he hears the call the second time, he will start to his feet and lean forward to listen the better. At the third call, he will rush out of the house toward the sound of it, and if you remain where you are, he will pass you, for I shall conceal myself much farther back before I utter the call."

"Then get busy, old chap. Lose no time."

"What shall I do after you are inside the house, and I am out here?"

"Hide wherever you can, near this spot. Watch and wait for me. Let circumstances govern what you do, but don't leave your post before it is almost daylight. If I have not returned to you by that time, go straight to the emperor."

"It strikes me that that is what we should have done in the first place."

"No; I don't think so. You forget that the exposure of this thing might upset all I have accomplished for the Secretary of State of my own country, by revealing the fact that the man who made the speech to the society was not the one supposed to have made it."*

The detective waited where he was while Harnett retired to a distance and concealed himself again; and then Nick heard the weirdest, wildest, strangest call he had ever before listened to, and watching the man on guard, the detective saw him raise his head and listen, while even from that distance Nick could see that he trembled with fear.

It all worked itself out precisely as Harnett had said it would, and presently the man dashed past the detective, into the shrubbery at the end of the garden, and upon the instant Nick leaped to his feet and darted forward.

He passed through the open door on the run, and past two of the dim lamps to a stairway, up which he bounded to the second floor of the building.

There he paused and listened, but hearing nothing, he turned about to consider which way he would go now.

Always a believer in making himself as thoroughly familiar with his surroundings as circumstances would permit, the detective determined to inspect first that part of the house where he was likely to discover Maoki himself, and he recalled that Harnett had said that would be the center of the mansion.

He knew, also, that it would be on the second floor, as the first one was given up to other things in such a building as that one.

As he turned toward the center of the building, which might be described as a circle at the center of the cross, he saw directly ahead of him an open door through which a bright light was streaming; and as he approached it, he could hear the sound of voices proceeding from that room.

A few steps nearer convinced him that one of the voices was Talika's, although he was not yet close enough to determine anything that was said.

There was an entry between the corridor where he was and the room from which the light shone out. Heavy curtains were festooned over the doorway to the room, and Nick, using great care, succeeded in getting to them without making a sound, and finally in concealing himself behind them in such a position that he could see beyond them into the room.

It was rather a startling sight that he saw then: a still more startling conversation that he listened to.

The room was large and square, and to the amazement of the detective, was furnished after the style of some of the most elegant houses in the city of New York. There was absolutely nothing in it that suggested the Japanese, save the people themselves, and a few of the decorations and ornaments; but these latter one will see in New York quite often.

But the people in the room were sufficiently Japanese—sufficiently barbaric, in fact.

Maoki, in all the richest splendor of the most bar-

*See No. 661.

baric of Japanese costumes that could have been selected, was seated in a huge chair, leaning forward with a hand resting on one of his knees. He was gazing directly at the figure in front of him, at a little distance away.

By his side, and fastened to him by a girdle, was a curved Japanese sword, the hilt and scabbard of which was studded thickly with blazing jewels.

CHAPTER VII.

ARRAYED IN HIDEOUS SPLENDOR.

At a little distance from Maoki and nearer to the girl was an octagonal table which, as the detective turned his eyes upon it, seemed almost to be on fire, for it was buried in a mass of gems and jewels that were strewn upon it.

There were strings of diamonds, strings of emeralds, of rubies, of pearls—of every form of precious stone imaginable, and they were heaped together in a confused mass until they glittered with a thousand fires of many colors and tints.

At the very center of the picture, in front of the gloating eyes of the Japanese officer, stood Talika, the beautiful geisha girl. She had now ceased speaking, but her eyes were flashing angrily. It was at once evident to Nick that she had been there only a few moments when he arrived upon the scene, and that no matter how badly she might be frightened by her surroundings, she had courage enough to conceal the fact from her captor.

She was arrayed in splendor that exceeded that of Maoki.

A bodice of crimson and black around her form was studded so thickly with jewels that the material could scarcely be seen between them. A jacket that suggested the Egyptian in cut, and which was of the same material as the bodice, was as thickly studded with precious stones. A tunic, or short skirt, which reached to her ankles seemed to be ablaze with flames of gleaming gems; there were slippers of satin on her little feet, and the long pins that were thrust through her wealth of coal-black hair were each topped by a huge diamond.

Around each wrist and each ankle was a bracelet of gold; and attached to these were golden chains of the size of an ordinary watch-chain. From each wrist-bracelet and each ankle-bracelet these chains were led through rings attached to a belt of gold that was about her waist.

It seemed to Nick as he looked upon the strange scene that the attendants who were gathered around Talika—and there were six of these, four men and two women—had just completed the arrangement and the fastening of the golden chains as he came upon the scene, for now they stood bowing before their master, as if he had just been asked what they were to do next.

But before he could reply, Talika spoke again, and angrily:

"You know, Maoki, what the emperor will make you suffer for this, when he finds it out. For every indignity you visit upon me, you will be tortured. You know it."

Maoki only chuckled; and Talika continued:

"I will tell him how you compelled me to array myself in this hideous costume; how my own clothing was taken from me by these women. There was no choice for me." The conversation was, of course, in the Japanese language, but Nick understood it perfectly.

"Hideous costume, adorable one?" chuckled Maoki. "Do you call it hideous? I call it magnificent. But wait till we have finished; then you shall see."

He gave a curt order to the attendants, and at once they began to take the strings of gems and jewels from the table and to scatter them over her.

Strings of the jewels were wound round and round her neck and waist, over her shoulders, through her hair, about her arms.

Everywhere where lodgment could be found to hold them, they were fastened, until at last she stood there literally a mass of gems and gleaming jewels.

Twice, while they were thus arraying her, she sought to tear the jewels from her and to throw them aside; but each time they were quietly replaced, and always there was the mocking voice of Maoki to announce to her that she only prolonged his own delight by her acts.

So at last she remained passive and permitted the decorations to be put upon her, biting her lips at times, and evidently using every resource within her to keep down the awful terror that she was no doubt suffering.

And all the time Maoki sat there gloating over her with his eyes full upon her beauty.

"The emperor will never know," he said to her at last, when the attendants had completed the decorations, and had withdrawn a few feet to the rear, where

they awaited further orders. "The emperor will never know," he repeated, replying to the statement she had made at the beginning of her expostulation. "To the world, beautiful Talika, you are dead. You have been foully murdered, and even now your murderer is awaiting execution in Tokio."

"What do you mean?" she gasped, bending forward toward him, and clenching her little hands together, making the chains rattle and the jewels gleam as she did so.

"What? Have you not been told?" he cried, in assumed astonishment. "But I forgot. There was no one to tell you. I gave orders that you were not to be spoken to or permitted to talk, did I not?"

"What do you mean by saying that I have been murdered, and that the murderer is even now awaiting execution?" she demanded again.

"Ah, Talika, it is one of my little plots; one of Maoki's little plots, and I am famous for them."

"Again what do you mean? I demand that you tell me."

"Demand? Ho, ho! You are no longer one who can make demands. You are a slave—my slave. But I will tell you what I mean. The knowledge may serve to reconcile you to your fate—for your fate is here—with me—as you have no doubt guessed."

She made no reply to this, and after a moment he continued:

"You did not know, when I took you away from your house and gave you into the hands of my men who were to bring you here, that I returned again to your house, did you?"

"No."

"Well, I did so."

"Why?"

"To arrange the little plot I spoke of; one of the plots for which I am famous."

"What plot was this?" She forced herself to reply to him calmly.

"You shall hear. There was a wandering dog in the street near your house when I returned to it, and I killed the animal with my sword. Then I carried it to your house, and I scattered the blood of the dog everywhere about the place. I rubbed it upon that sword of yours that was there; I spattered it against the walls; I tracked it through the house. I tore in half that jacket you had worn during the evening and part of it is now stained with the blood you drew from my hand when you scratched me with one of your pins. The other half I used to wrap the hand in until I found a place to dispose of what remained of the garment. I made it appear as if a terrible crime had been committed there, as if you had been foully murdered, my dear. What do you think of it?"

"And then——" she demanded breathlessly.

"Why, then I gave information against the man you favored: the man whose bracelet you accepted—the bracelet that I crushed under my heel. He could not give you such jewels as these, could he?"

"What do you mean by saying that you gave information against him?"

"Why, I ordered one of my men to swear that he saw the man enter your house soon after three in the morning—the time I went there, if you remember. My man swore that he saw him—what is his name? Oh, it is Carver or Carter; it does not matter which—saw him enter the house, and that he remained there over an hour."

"Was—was Nick Carter arrested?" she gasped.

"Ah; so that is his name, is it? Yes, he was arrested. Quite so."

"And then what?"

"What could be next. He was speedily found guilty of the crime, of course. He was condemned to suffer the punishment."

"What punishment?"

"Ah, indeed, what punishment? What punishment is accorded to those who murder a geisha?"

"Oh, no, not that! Not that!"

"Why, yes; that of course. What else would you have, adorable one?"

"You fiend! You fiend!"

"He is to be taken at dawn to the outskirts of the city, and there, while he is still alive he will be cut into quarters and the quarters will be fed to the crows and vultures. You know that as well as I."

With a wild cry she leaped toward him, but before she could cross the distance that separated them the attendants seized her and drew her back again; and it was wonderful, Nick thought, how she managed to control herself.

That she believed the lies Maoki was telling her was evident; that she was utterly helpless before him, was only too apparent.

Still her eyes flashed, and although she was very pale, she showed no signs of faintness.

"And so you see," Maoki continued, "the emperor will never know what has become of you. He will never know that I have brought you here. And all the time I shall walk among your old friends, among those who knew you; I shall mourn for you with

them—and later, when the labors of the day or the week are over and past, I will return here to bask in the glory of your eyes."

"You fiend!" she murmured.

"Really, beautiful one," he went on, "you should thank me for what I have done. See the jewels with which I have loaded you. Are they not wonderful? Well, there are more. It is true that they were stolen from temples in India by my fathers before me, and by myself, also, but they are none the less yours now. If you only realized how beautiful you are with them glowing upon you——"

"I do not believe the lies you have told me about Nick Carter," she said to him suddenly.

"Don't you? Well, it does not matter—since I have told you only the truth."

"They are lies, lies, lies! The emperor is Nick Carter's friend; and Ten-Ichi——"

"Ten-Ichi was sent away out of the country early this morning by the emperor. He will not return for many months."

"But the emperor is Nick Carter's friend."

"Aye, even so. What of that? The emperor believes that you have been murdered and that it was Nick Carter who killed you. Do you think that even he would condone such a crime?"

"It is a tissue of lies that you tell me," she repeated.

"You say so, but you do not believe so. To-morrow morning, when the sun rises, Nick Carter will be hanging in four pieces, waiting for the crows to come. Ah!" and he rubbed his hands together in too evident enjoyment. After a moment, he added:

"Ho, there, Shumshi!"

"Yes, exalted one," replied one of the attendants, stepping forward.

"Take her back now to her rooms. Let the women remain with her, and do you and your three companions remain on guard at the door. And you, Nanki-san," he added, addressing one of the women, "see to it that the jewels are still upon her. But watch her, watch her closely lest she should make use of them or of something else with which to do herself injury. If so much as a hair of her head is injured, even by her own act, your fate will be the same as that of the man I have just been describing. Now go."

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER MAKES A DARING MOVE.

Instantly, when he heard these directions given by Maoki, the detective realized what obstacles would soon be placed in his way to interfere with his hope of gaining access to Talika herself in her captivity.

He knew that once she was inside that room to which she was about to be sent, there would be two women there with her to guard her inside, and four men without, to stand guard there.

He realized that there would be little hope of his being able to get past them, at least, without arousing the entire establishment by the racket that would be made in so doing.

Plainly there was only one course to be pursued.

While it would have been his choice to have remained where he was until the others were gone, and then to have fallen upon Maoki, he did not believe it to be the best policy at the moment, since it was more than likely that the men in the establishment would be aroused, and his whole plan might be put to naught.

And so it was that before those inside the room had started to leave it, he had himself turned away and started rapidly along the corridor toward that wing which Harnett had said was likely to be the one where Talika would be imprisoned.

He had to take his chances as to that.

There was the possibility of a mistake, but there was no time in which to investigate, and so he ran on, managing to make the turn into the south wing before Talika and her guard had come from the room where the strange scene had just occurred.

He ran to the end of that arm of the cross—to the T of it, in fact; and he discovered what he had hoped to find, an open door at the extremity of it.

Without an instant of hesitation he passed through this doorway into the room beyond, which occupied the whole T where it crossed the end of the arm of the house.

A glance told him that he had gaged the matter correctly.

There were evidences enough to prove to him that it was the room to which Talika had been taken when she was brought there, and therefore the one to which she was now being conducted.

He had decided that he could fight against the odds opposed to him much better if he were inside the room than if he were on the outside, and now, as he entered it, he looked hastily around him for a place in which to hide until the time came to act.

Rooms in Japanese houses are not remarkable for furniture; in fact, they are chiefly remarkable for the absence of such things as we consider indispensable to comfort.

But yonder, in one corner, Nick espied a huge chest of teakwood; evidently it had come originally from China. It was certainly all of eight feet long and at least two feet at its other dimensions.

He ran to it, and having thrown back the silk covering that was spread over it, raised the lid, which moved easily.

To his delight, he discovered that it was made almost entirely of scroll-work, which is to say, that but for the silken scarf that covered it, it was practically a mass of holes.

And then, as he examined it, he made still another discovery, which was that it was made so that the front and back of it would let down, for they were hinged at the bottom. He had once seen just another such chest, in Pekin, and he knew them to be used for some sort of a Chinese game much indulged in by royalty.

He pulled it far enough away from the wall so that he could lower the back of it, and so leave that part of it open for his ready egress when he should wish to get out of it; then with his knife he cut several slits in the silken scarf at the front. Then he clambered into it and dropped the lid over him.

He found that with his lead-pencil he could reach out through the scroll-work and press open the slits he had made in the scarf, so that he could see what was going on in the room; and then, just as he completed his arrangements, the party entered the door.

The four men stopped upon the threshold, stood there a moment, and then withdrew, closing the door behind them: the women came on into the room, one on either side of Talika; and, oddly enough, they led her directly to the chest inside which Nick Carter was concealed, and seated her upon it.

"You are a geisha," one of them said then. "You will not kill yourself, will you?"

"Not until there is no hope," replied Talika calmly. "Then I will do so if I may. I pray you, one of you, give me the means to do it, when there is no more hope for me."

"We would befriend you if we dared," replied the woman, unheeding the request for the moment. "But we dare not. Maoki would condemn us to terrible torture. You were right when you called him a fiend, Talika."

"I know. I know. But I pray you give me the means to take my life at the last moment."

"He would know that we did it."

"Well—there is a way for you to escape also, with me."

"To die with you, as you do; yes."

"It is much to ask, Talika."

"Is it too much to ask, for the honor of a geisha?"

"No."

"You will do it?"

"I will do better than that, Talika. See"—evidently she exhibited some sort of a weapon, although Nick, being beneath them, could not see what it was—"with this, when the time comes, I will kill you, and then myself. In that way Nanki-san need not die. Okra-san will be dead, but there is none to mourn her."

"But, Okra-san, you forget. I would live till the last moment. When that comes, perhaps if you give me the dagger, I may even have a chance to kill him instead."

"Ah! If I thought that, Talika, I would give you the knife. But no; he is a devil and he is watched over by devils who will not let him be killed. Twice I have tried to do it and each time he had enough me at it."

"It is a wonder, then, that he has let you live on."

"Oh, he needs me. Some day he will kill me, but——"

"I pray you, Okra-san, give me the dagger."

"And if I do—what then?"

"Why, then, if I am obliged to kill myself before you do, I will prepare the way for you over there so there will be no dark places for you to wander through; and if I kill the fiend——"

"Yes, yes! Then——"

"Then we will go together to the emperor. He will see me. He will listen to me. I will plead your case to him. He will pardon you for all that you have done, and he will thank you for what you will have done for me."

"Swear it, Talika."

"By all the forefathers of mine who reach back into the past until time is no more, I so swear, Okra-san."

"Take it; but conceal it. Remember."

"Yes; I will remember."

"You will not do injury to yourself unless it is more than necessary?"

"No; for I would live if I may. Oh, Okra-san, and Nanki-san, if only I could escape this night! Do you think that I could get back to Tokio before the dawn?"

"I know not. I have a relative who owns a boat, with which he might take you across the bay to Yokosuka; and from there——"

"Oh, if only it could be done. If only I could escape from this terrible place in time!"

"In time for what, Talika?"

"Did you not hear the fiend say? Did you not hear him tell about the man who is to be drawn and quartered in the morning because it is thought that he has murdered me? I would save him. Do you suppose that I could take my own life while there was hope that I might, by living, save him? No."

"Do you love him so well, Talika?"

"Listen, Okra-san. I love him better than anybody in the world, but he must not know it, and I must not tell him so, ever, because I am a geisha. There, we will not talk about it. I could not be his wife, even if he wanted me, which he does not. So we will forget it. Ah, the knife you gave me, my friend. Perhaps it will open the way to liberty for me. Okra-san, will you and Nanki-san go and get me something to eat, and some wine to drink that I may be made strong for what there is to do? I have not eaten to-day. I could not."

"But we were ordered not to leave you for a moment."

"That was only because the fiend thought I would kill myself if you did so. But now that you know I will not; now that you know how much reason I have for living—until all hope is lost, you know that I will not."

"Yes."

"Then get me food; and wine."

They rose obediently and the three crossed the room together toward the door.

The detective from his place of concealment could see them quite plainly now.

He saw that Talika led the way to the door, and that before opening it, she listened at it with care; it was unlike other doors that Nick had seen in Japanese houses, for most of them had been such flimsy things that any strong person could easily have pushed them down.

But this one was made of solid wood set in a solid frame and looked as if it might withstand anything short of a battering-ram.

Presently Talika motioned to the women to draw nearer, and then of a sudden she opened the door and thrust them through the aperture before either of them were well aware of her intention; and then instantly she closed and fastened the door on the inside, laughing aloud as she did so.

Nick realized then what had been her intention all along.

She had meant first to possess herself of a weapon, which she had succeeded in doing, and then she had hoped to rid herself of the presence of the two women, which condition she had also brought about.

What her further plans might be, he did not stop to ask himself, for instantly he rolled out of the chest at the rear, and stood upright, waiting for her to turn, for her back was at the moment toward him.

As she did not move, he took a step forward, and then in a low voice, he spoke.

"Talika," he said, "it is I—Nick Carter. Do not cry out. Don't be frightened."

To his surprise she did not turn. He thought he saw her shudder for an instant; and then she asked calmly, and still without turning:

"Have they put you to death so soon, Nick Carter? But you have come to me in the spirit, for I heard your voice, even though I may not see you."

"Hush, child," said Nick, understanding her now, but refraining from touching her, for he knew that it would frighten her. "I am not dead. I am here. The fiend lied to you. I am not dead. Turn about and look at me, Talika."

Slowly she obeyed him, but her eyes were still frightened as she turned.

But then, when she saw him and knew that he was indeed alive, the blood rushed back into her face, and she took one step forward and then threw herself bodily into his arms, weeping with very joy.

CHAPTER IX.

A BATTLE BEHIND CLOSED DOORS.

A sharp pounding against the door interrupted them a moment later, and at a sign from the detective, Talika approached it and called out:

"Why do you rap against the door?"

The reply came from one of the men. He said:

"Because we wish you to open."

"I will not open," she told him.

"Then the door will be broken down."

"Very well, break it. I will not open."

"Not when the master comes?"

"Not at all. Less then than ever."

"I shall send for him."

"Do so."

"We will break down the door when he comes."

She did not reply to this but turned back again to Nick with her eyes aglow. Strangely enough, in the needs of the moment they both permitted the mass of jewels that blazed upon her to go unheeded: she

because she had totally forgotten them in her abundance of joy, and he because other things of more weight were on his mind.

For he had already turned away toward the eight windows that the room contained.

It sounds like a great many windows to have in one room—eight; but all of them put together would not have made a respectable pair.

There were four at the end of the T and they therefore opened to the south, and there were two at the east and two more at the west extremities of it.

But they were shuttered with iron, as has already been mentioned, and these windows of this room had been shuttered from the outer side, that is, they were fastened outside instead of inside, as if in preparation for Talika's imprisonment.

Besides that, the detective remembered that every window had iron bars outside the shutters. He abandoned his examination of them as entirely hopeless.

"It does not appear, Talika," he said to her at last, "as if there is any really good way to escape from this room."

She shrugged her shoulders almost like a Frenchwoman; then she smiled brightly, and then she actually laughed aloud.

"Forgive me," she exclaimed instantly. "But I am so happy now that this room seems like another heaven. I—I know it is wicked, but I do not want to escape."

"Don't you? Well, I do. I am going to accomplish it, too."

"How?"

"I don't know the answer to that question, just yet. But I will find a way."

"Through the windows?"

"No; that is impossible."

"Through the walls?"

"I confess to you that they do not look very promising either."

"Through the ceiling?"

"Well, such things have been done, although this particular ceiling looks rather stout."

"Through the floor?"

He stamped his feet upon it, and laughed.

"I am afraid not. I have been looking at it. And yet I don't know. It might be done. The wood looks hard enough, but the point of my knife goes into it quite freely. If only I had an axe, now; or a sledge, or something of that sort."

"But you haven't."

"No; if we get out through the floor we will have to dig out. Let me have a look at that dagger that was given you by Okra-san. I wonder if I could not make some sort of a chisel out of it."

She gave it to him and he examined it attentively.

"It might be made to do," he murmured presently. "It will be a tedious job, however. Talika, I wonder what sort of a room is beneath us? Suppose we should get down there, where would we bring up, do you suppose?"

She shook her head.

"I haven't the least idea," she replied. "I know as little about the house as you do. And, besides, it occurs to me that by the time you dug a hole through the floor, our enemies would be awaiting us there, just as they are now outside the door."

"I guess that is true, too. However, I'm going to dig."

There was a chimney in the room, with a small fireplace, a most unusual sight in a Japanese house, but Maeki had lived in America, and learned to value comfort. The flue he had already discovered was not large enough to admit a child; but now he approached it to find something that he could use as a hammer, if possible.

But as he drew nearer to the bricks, he stopped; and he stood there so long a time, in his study of the chimney that at last Talika asked him what was the matter.

"I was thinking," he replied, "that perhaps there is an easier way out than to try to go through the floor. I think it would be easier to go through the chimney, for the other side of it is outside the building, and we are not more than twelve or possibly fourteen feet above the ground."

There was nothing, absolutely nothing there to use as a hammer, but all the same Nick began to dig at the bricks, knowing that as soon as he had loosened one he would have a hammer to use, although he did not care so much about that now, since most of the work in this new field would be the slow digging away of the mortar.

The chimney, like the furniture in that first room the detective had seen in the building, was a modern institution. The bricks of which it was built were evidently imported, and the cement that had been used, he soon discovered, was of very inferior quality, and crumbled almost as soon as he touched it.

In much less than half the time he had expected to consume, he had dug away three of the bricks and had a very respectable hole well started.

"I am getting on famously," he said to Talika, turning toward her. "At this rate we will be through

in—let me see—two or three hours. Hello! They are at it again."

This remark was caused by his hearing a terrific pounding against the door.

"I shouldn't wonder if Maoki is out there now," he said to Talika in a low tone. "Find out if you can."

She went close to the door and called out:

"Who is there?"

"It is I," replied the voice of Maoki. "Open that door."

"Not I, illustrious one," she replied; and she laughed.

"If you do not, I will break it down."

She did not answer.

"Do you hear me?" he demanded from the opposite side of the door.

"Oh, yes. I hear you."

"Then open."

"I will not open a door to you—ever."

There was a moment of silence after that, and then a terrible crash against the door that made it shake, and Nick knew that Maoki was carrying his threat into execution.

"Stand aside," he said to Talika; and as she obeyed, he pulled a screen toward him so that he could place it before the door when he was ready to do so; then he told her to call out again.

"Call to Maoki," he whispered to her. "I want to locate him."

"Oh, General Maoki!" she called obediently. Instantly there was a reply.

"You are willing to listen to reason, are you?" the man replied to her.

But the utterance had barely ceased when there was a loud report from a pistol in Nick Carter's hand, and a bullet went crashing through the door toward the direction of Maoki's voice.

There was a shout and a curse from the outside as Nick pulled the screen before the door and stood it there.

"Why do you do that with the screen?" she asked him.

"In order that they may not peer at us through the hole made by my bullet," he whispered back. "Do not talk now. I don't want them to think that you have company."

"Why?"

"Because if it was suspected that I was here, the house would be surrounded instantly by his men, and our means of escape thus cut off. As it is, they think that you are here alone."

"But this pistol-shot."

"That will puzzle Maoki, yes; but it will not occur to him that a man is in here with you. Okra-san and Nanki-san will both swear that you are alone, if they are asked."

"And you have not told me yet how you got here."

"Hush. We will save all that till later. Can you fire a pistol?"

"As well as I can swing a sword, and you know how I can do that."

"Very well. Stand here. They will not fire at you."

"I know that."

"If they attack the door again, call out as you did before, and then shoot."

"I will," she said, taking the revolver in her grasp; and Nick saw by the way she handled it that she well knew how to use it.

The detective then returned to his attack upon the chimney, for he had found as he got deeper into it the cement became still softer, and he believed that he would not be so very long in winning their way to freedom by that means.

With his great strength he was able frequently, by digging behind some of the bricks, to pull entire sections of them away from the chimney at once, and he began to fear that he might undermine the thing so thoroughly that the whole upper part of the chimney would fall into ruins.

He did not want that to happen, as it would apprise those outside the door of what he was doing.

He was startled presently by the crack of the revolver again, and this time it was followed by a curse and a groan which told unmistakably that some one was wounded.

Nick turned and nodded toward Talika, and she smiled back at him.

All her terror seemed to have vanished now, although Nick realized that the danger was as great as it had ever been.

If Maoki should succeed in battering down the door before he could work a hole through the chimney, it would mean an unequal fight in which the detective would doubtless lose his life, and Talika would be recaptured.

But now Maoki called out, evidently greatly disturbed and puzzled by the fact that Talika had a revolver.

"Where did you get it?" he demanded; and she retorted:

"Never mind that so long as it is here."

And as she ceased speaking she fired again toward the sound of his voice, and after it they could both hear him cursing and stamping his feet in an excess of rage.

After that there was a long period of silence during which Nick Carter worked on like mad at the chimney, for he felt that the silence portended only the fact that Maoki had sent somewhere for a larger and a heavier beam with which to force the door.

"If we can keep them off only half an hour longer" was his thought as he worked on.

CHAPTER X.

A FLIGHT THROUGH THE NIGHT.

There was a time of utter silence then that lasted about fifteen minutes, but it was followed by a resounding crash against the door that made splinters fly from it, and Nick knew that it could not withstand more than two or three such shocks as that without giving way.

He turned from the chimney and leaped toward Talika, taking the revolver from her hand. Then he threw himself prone upon the floor and in that position aimed first at one and then at another of the holes already made by bullets in the door.

And he fired three times in this way, being rather gratified to hear each time a shout or a curse or a groan to tell him that his bullets had found a mark.

Then he thrust the pistol into her hand again and ran back to the chimney.

He had gained, as he discovered, another short respite.

They could hear groans and the sounds of talking in the corridor; but now he was working at the bricks with feverish haste, for he had not only reached at last the outside layer, but already two of them had been knocked from their places, so that the cool night air rushed in upon him.

And just at that moment the sounds in the hallway outside told him also that the men were bringing their battering-ram forward for another attack.

He had reloaded the revolver after using it, and now he called to her in a whisper:

"Shoot, Talika, shoot! Shoot away all the cartridges you have and then run here to me!"

She did as he directed.

The revolver did not crack as rapidly as it would have done in the hands of Nick Carter, but it did it none the less spitefully until she had fired the five charges it contained.

Then, just as she fired the last one of them, Nick sprang forward and kicked with his feet against the wall of bricks that remained to stop their flight.

It was the last effort that was necessary on his part.

The bricks gave way before that furious kick of his, and fell outward; the next instant the entire upper part of the chimney fell with a crash and amid a cloud of thick dust so dense that one could not see through it.

Already Talika was beside him, and he seized her hand and pulled her with him into and through the dust-cloud just as the battering-ram came again against the door and burst it from its fastenings.

But as that happened Nick raised the geisha girl in his arms and sprang outward with her.

He knew that he was risking broken limbs in doing so, in case they should alight upon the fallen mass of bricks, but better that than what waited behind for them.

As it happened they alighted upon a deep, soft bed of flowers, into which Nick's feet sank half-way to his knees; and then they both pitched forward on their faces.

But the detective was up again instantly, and, seizing Talika in his arms, he carried her and ran until he was out past the arm of the building. Then he shouted:

"Harnett! Oh, Harnett! This way! This way!"

An answering cry told him that Harnett had heard his call and was running toward him, so he paused for a moment to wait, for if truth be told he did not know now which way to flee.

Oddly enough, too, he noticed then for the first time that Talika still wore her golden chains and all the jewels with which she had been loaded, for the chains had not been drawn closely enough to impede her movements in any way.

It had been used more as a badge of servitude, than to confine her.

But there was no time to make comment upon it then, for at that instant Harnett came dashing up to them.

By the light of the stars, he, too, saw the gleaming of the jewels, and he gasped out:

"Great Scott, have you robbed the national vaults of the crown jewels?"

"The men are after us," said Nick quickly. "Where shall we go? Where can we hide? There must be half a hundred of them or more."

"Follow me, Carter! If we can make it, we will be all right."

"Make what?" gasped Nick; and he again picked Talika up in his arms, saying as he did so:

"You can't run with all those things on you, and there is no time to take them off now. Make what?" he asked again of Harnett.

"My own house. You know I told you that I had one here, on property adjoining this."

"Yes."

"I will take you there if we can make it; and if we do, we will escape them."

There was no more talk after that. They needed all their breath for the exertions they were making.

Several times as they ran, Talika begged to be put down, insisting that she could run with them even though she did wear the chains and ropes of jewels.

But Nick Carter clung to her for all that.

There was a cleared space containing perhaps several acres, and about twenty rods in width that they were obliged to cross before they could enter a grove and so be out of immediate observation, and they were struggling to get across that before they were seen.

But in this they were unsuccessful, for just as they were entering the wood a loud cry coming from the direction of the house told that they had been discovered; and the next instant came the report of a rifle and the whisper of a bullet as it flicked past.

"My, but that was close," said Nick, as he dived into the woods.

Under the cover of these, Harnett turned sharply to the right; and soon he led them down a steep embankment into a ravine where they turned to the left, thus taking a course parallel to the one they had first pursued.

"Possibly we can outwit them," he exclaimed; and plunged onward again.

Nick was saying nothing.

It required all his great strength and powers of endurance to keep up that pace with the burden he carried, for in addition to Talika's weight, which was not great, there was all the gold she carried upon her, and there must have been twenty pounds scattered among the gold and the jewels she wore.

But Talika asked a question for him which he had been puzzling his head about.

"How far is it, Harnett?" she called to him; but he made no answer.

Possibly he did not wish to discourage them; possibly he did not exactly know himself.

Once Nick paused for a moment to catch his breath and to listen for sounds of pursuit; but with a sudden cry of alarm he seized Talika again in his arms and started on after Harnett, who had not paused.

"Dogs," he called out to the girl. "Talika, you must not be frightened."

"I'm not as long as I am with you," she replied.

They came to another edge of the wood now, and there Harnett was waiting for them.

"Don't stop," said Nick. "They have put dogs on our trail."

"I knew it. I knew they would do so," was the calm reply. "But we are safe now. Come."

A stone wall which Nick had not seen was directly in front of them, as was also a heavy door that was set into it.

To this door Harnett fitted a key which he had in readiness, and as they passed through, he closed and locked it after them.

"Those chaps will not be long in battering that down," said the detective.

"I know that, Carter; but we will not be here when they do that. Come."

Across a wide yard he led the way toward a low house of stone that loomed in the distance.

"My house isn't like the other," he said, then hastened forward. "It is all of stone, if it is only one story in height. Hark!"

It was the baying of the dogs that they heard, and as they listened the huge animals arrived at the door through which they had just passed; and there the dogs stopped and howled most dismally.

In another moment, Harnett, who was leading, reached the house, and presently he had its door open, and they entered, while he closed and locked and then barred it behind them.

"Light a match, Carter, and follow me," Harnett said then.

"I don't have to. I've got something better," replied the detective; and he pulled from one of his pockets his electric torch, fastening the button down as he did so.

By this means they followed Harnett past several doors, each of which he locked and barred after them, and presently they came to a large and rather comfortably furnished room.

"I use this place for a hunting-lodge, as they would say in England," he told Nick. "Over there, as you see, is a rack of guns. There are four good rifles there, and all the ammunition we will need. Talika, will you make yourself comfortable here while Carter and I go to the roof?"

"To the roof?"

"Yes. It is built like a fort. We are going to take some rifles up there, and some ammunition, and fight those fellows off."

"But I am going, too," she insisted.

"Oh, all right. Come along, then, if you like, only keep out of the way of Maoki's bullets."

"You had better remain here, Talika," said Nick, selecting a rifle and filling his pockets with cartridges to fit it.

"No," she replied, "I am going with you;" and as they went upon the roof she followed with another rifle and a supply of cartridges.

"Nobody knows how old these buildings are," said Harnett to Nick, as they took their places behind a parapetlike wall that went all the way around the house. "But originally there is no doubt that this place, as well as the one where Maoki lives, was the headquarters of pirates, or of independent barons of some kind. This roof was built, as you can plainly see, for fighting purposes. The other house was like this before Maoki put another story upon it. Underneath both houses is a veritable network of underground passages which I have never had the courage to explore. In fact, I discovered that they were there only by accident. I told nobody about them, only Lakatira, and suggested that we might find a treasure there, but he said they were full of departed spirits of the dead, and that if I attempted to search them, I would be accursed, and possibly wither up like an old man before my time. Look yonder, Carter."

"Yes. I am watching."

"I guess that it is right here where the fun begins; eh?"

"It looks like it," said the detective, raising his rifle.

In another instant it cracked, and a dog that had dashed through the broken door in the wall rolled over dead.

Then he fired again, and a man who had followed the dog fell to the earth with a scream.

"Got him, too," said Harnett, with a laugh.

"Only in the leg, Harnett. I did not shoot to kill."

"Well, I shall, especially if I can get a bead on Maoki."

"I might do that myself," replied the detective grimly.

Just then Talika's rifle cracked, and a second man near the wall pitched forward; but he remained where he had fallen, and without moving. Harnett grinned.

"Talika is shooting straighter than you are, Carter," he said.

"I don't blame her," said Nick. "I think I would do the same if I had had the provocation she has had."

Talika fired again, and a second dog that had passed the wall dropped in its tracks.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CRATER IN THE MOUNTAIN.

The reception that the followers of Maoki found at the door through the wall was evidently as disconcerting as it was unexpected, for there were no more immediate attempts on their part to charge the house, on the roof of which Nick Carter and his two friends were fortified.

Both the Siberian wolf-hounds that had been pursuing them were already dead, and two men at least were out of the running.

Nick had time then to look around him somewhat.

Although it was night, the stars were bright and one could discern objects plainly at a considerable distance.

The detective saw that the wall through which they had passed in order to gain access to the house ran entirely around it, and had evidently been erected originally as a fortification, also, for it bore every sign of advanced age, for which the house itself was remarkable.

Presently he turned to Harnett and inquired:

"How many men do you suppose Maoki has got over there, that he can bring against us?"

Harnett shrugged his shoulders and thought a moment before he replied. Then he said:

"It is hard to say, Carter. Nobody knows Maoki's resources. It is certain that he has as many as fifty. It is likely that he has got two hundred or more scattered around this neighborhood, whom he can summon in a short time."

"Then it stands to reason," said the detective, "that we cannot long resist them if we remain here, doesn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think we can repulse them and drive them back."

"I do not. Maoki knows that he has got to kill us now, of a certainty. If we were dead and out of the way he might stand some show of making his peace with the emperor, but if we should escape there would be no chance for him at all."

"That is correct."

"Therefore he will offer rewards among his men that will make them totally unmindful of our bullets. They will rush us, and if they do that, they will overcome us by sheer force of numbers."

"Perhaps you are right."

"I know that I am right. Now, Harnett, you said something a moment ago that interested me considerably."

"What was it?"

"About those old vaults and things under this building. Tell me more about them."

"I don't know that there is much more to tell than I have already said."

"Oh, yes, there is. There is a great deal more."

"What, for instance?"

"Tell me first something about the histories of these houses. This one and also that owned by Maoki, from which I just escaped with Talika."

"I have already told you all that I know. They are older than history. There is no known record of their past. It is not known when or by whom the stone part of them was built. This one had fallen almost into ruins when I purchased it. The other one has been in the possession of Maoki's family for many generations—through the lives of his father and grandfather, at least, and I do not know how much farther back than that. There is no doubt that this peninsula, formed here by Tokio Bay, was once peopled by a warlike faction of the Nipponese, who defied even the power of the ancient mikados. Those people were doubtless outlaws and pirates who preyed upon their fellow men. It is my own opinion that Maoki is descended from those people. It has been whispered that there are great treasures stored here, but that all of it is guarded by the ghosts of murdered men."

The detective turned a smiling face toward Talika, and remarked:

"I think the present costume of Talika would bear out that idea. Child, you have now time to remove some of that splendor, if you care to do so."

"No," she replied. "I am accustomed to it now. Let it remain; and besides, I do not want to leave my post. We do not know at what minute the attack may commence again."

"That is true. I will touch upon that presently. Now, Harnett, if there is treasure here, it is doubtless concealed in those vaults you spoke about; eh?"

"Yes. I should suppose so."

"I don't care anything about the treasure, but I do care about those vaults, for I believe that we can find a way through them to escape."

"Possibly. I had not thought of that."

"You say that you discovered their existence by accident?"

"Yes."

"Is it your opinion that their existence is known to Maoki?"

"I don't know."

"Well, Harnett, the silence that surrounds us now tells me quite plainly that Maoki is only waiting for a sufficient force of men at his back, to make an assault that will carry this house, and which will be the end of us if we remain here. Therefore—*we must take to the vaults you tell about.*"

"It looks to me like jumping from the frying-pan into the fire."

"Well, anyhow, the fire is the quicker of the two; and we might as well utilize the time while our enemies are quiet. Come on."

"What do you propose to do?"

"Take to the vaults."

"May I make a suggestion?" asked Talika.

"Certainly," replied Nick.

"Then you and Harnett go below together and search the vaults. Leave me here on guard. If you hear my rifle, come to me; otherwise I will remain here until you return for me."

It was a daring thing for her to suggest, but it was acceded to, and after another careful survey around the house, Nick told Harnett to lead the way, and they went below.

The way into the vaults led through a sort of cellar where Harnett had some time before that begun to dig away part of the foundation in order to replace it with better, and in so doing had discovered the "vaults," as he called them.

But Nick Carter, as we know, had had considerable experience in such places, at one time and another, and he recognized instantly that he was inside manufactured caverns that were not only extensive, but that had been excavated for a very definite purpose.

And there could be but one definite purpose for which such corridors would have been dug, he thought, particularly if the men who dug them were formerly pirates; and that purpose would have been to make a secret way to the water, so that they could get to their boats without exposing themselves; and vice versa.

He had just determined upon this, and also to take his chances in the caverns, when three reports from

Talika's rifle in quick succession, called them swiftly back to the roof.

A perfect storm of bullets swept over the top of the roof as they came out upon it, and Nick Carter saw at once that the attack upon them had been made in earnest.

With quick glances around he discovered that men were swarming over the outer wall in all directions, and they were running toward the house, firing as they ran.

"Come," he said. "Keep your rifles and follow me."

They dived below, fastening securely the trap-door in the roof after them, and in another moment they were in the cellar where they entered the passage-way in the vaults.

Unfortunately there was no way to close that behind them, and Nick knew that it would not be long before they would be tracked that far, and pursuit would cling to them under the ground. But he relied upon their rifles and the narrow passages to be able to keep the pursuers at a respectful distance.

Former experiences stood the detective well in hand now, for he was able to select with his eye the passages which appeared to him to be the most likely to be main corridors.

He led the way now, keeping one hand upon Talika and assisting her all he could, while Harnett brought up the rear. The only light they had was that afforded by Nick's electric torch, the battery of which was fresh and capable of lasting several hours.

There were frequent turns in the corridor, where the creators of it had been obliged to dig their way around huge rock formations; otherwise it appeared to be straight, and led, the detective thought, almost due west, which would take them ultimately to salt water.

Once, when they stopped for a moment to rest and to listen for sounds of pursuit, the detective asked his friend:

"How far should you call it from your house to salt water, in a straight line?"

"A straight line would take us directly through a mountain," was the reply.

"Well, all the more reason for asking the question, since we are underground. How far?"

"A little more than a mile, say."

"We certainly have come at least half a mile already. Come; let us go on."

But they had not gone much farther ere they all paused at the same instant in surprise. They had stepped out from the corridor through which they had been traveling, into an immense cavern into which St. Peter's cathedral at Rome or the capitol at Washington might easily have rested, and into which those immense buildings might have been placed one on top of the other without reaching half-way to the top of it.

Directly over their heads, hundreds of feet in the air, was an opening through which they could see stars shining.

"We are at the bottom of an extinct volcanic crater," said the detective. "The question is, now that we are in it, how do we get out of it." He thought deeply a moment, and then he added: "There is only one method that appeals to me, and that is to follow around the side of the crater until we arrive at another cavern."

"Shall I go one way and you another?" asked Harnett.

"No; it will be better to stick together. I will take the lead with the light. You follow with Talika. We do not want to fall into any crevices, and there must be many of them in this place."

They started ahead, Nick constantly flashing his light along the walls which in some places were of obsidian formation, in others lime-rock, in others granite.

They had made what Nick figured to be about a quarter of the circuit of the place when suddenly he came to a dead stop and instantly extinguished his light by releasing the button that held it.

"Shhhhhh!" he breathed warningly. "Not a sound of any kind, now," he whispered. "Voices will carry far here. Listen!"

They did so, and they could hear voices which became louder and louder with each second. These were followed presently by the flashing of many lights, and then from a place in the great cavern that was almost opposite them, many men emerged from another passage.

They were carrying torches and lanterns, and were no doubt led by Maoki, although at that distance in the flashing lights faces could not be recognized.

It was a picturesque sight, however, to see those men enter the cavern and march along it with their dancing lights, for they seemed to know exactly where they were going. It was a way that Maoki had apparently traveled before.

"It is fortunate that we carried a light that could be extinguished instantly," said the detective in a low whisper, "otherwise we would have been discovered. It is fortunate also that we took to the 'vaults,' for those men are on their way to your house, Harnett.

At least, their coming has done us one service: it has shown us one way to get out of here. But there should be another, to lead us to the coast. There *must* be another. Stand where you are and do not move until they have disappeared."

CHAPTER XII.

THE END OF THE ADVENTURE.

The detective counted the men as well as he could, as they moved along the opposite side of the crater, and there were fifty-two of them. Outside, before they left the roof of the house, he had calculated that at least a hundred were climbing the wall that surrounded it, and so now he had positive proof that they would have stood no chance of resistance had they remained where they were.

The party made its way directly toward the gallery through which the detective and his friends had approached the crater, and presently their lights disappeared one by one into it until all was darkness around them again—and silence.

Still they waited a time longer, to be sure that there were no stragglers; and at last satisfied on that point Nick pressed the light into service again, and they continued on their way.

His idea that there was still another way into and hence out of the crater, than the two he was now aware of, proved presently to be correct, for they came upon a place that was almost opposite the one where they entered the crater, and into this Nick at once led them.

"Those men will discover presently that we have escaped from the house," he said, "and then they will follow us. We must make haste."

But their course was now much easier. The gallery they traversed was higher and wider and smoother, and they made their way rapidly along it.

As they advanced, the cavernous place became still wider and higher. Along the sides of it at frequent intervals, they could see chests that had been broken open, and that time had rotted.

Here and there their feet kicked against old weapons of queer patterns that were strewn upon the floor of the cavern; and there were other interesting things to attract their attention if they had had the time and the disposition to investigate.

But they scarcely glanced to the right or the left as they hurried onward.

Presently Nick noticed that Talika was lagging under the weight she carried, and without a word he handed the light to Harnett, and took her in his arms, carrying her.

And so, of a sudden, they came to a wall of rock which seemed to bar their farther progress.

For a moment Harnett was appalled, but not so the detective.

He had seen such arrangements before, and presently after a short search he pointed toward a wide and high door that was made of planks and which was held in place by a bar across it.

It did not take them long to remove that impediment, and, throwing the door open, they stepped out upon a ledge of rock that overlooked a cove that jutted into the land from the bay of Tokio.

Dawn was just at hand.

Directly beneath them, anchored a few rods from shore, was one of those curiously rigged sailing craft which are used along that coast, and drawn up on the shore near it was a small boat that evidently belonged to it.

Before them was a path that led down to the shingle along the shore.

They lost no time in descending this path, Nick still carrying Talika in his arms; and he did not release her until he had placed her safely in the small boat and had shoved it into the water.

The sailing craft they boarded—its local name would not interest you for you could not pronounce it; it had the appearance of a bug-eye with lateen sails instead of leg-o'-mutton—was perhaps thirty feet long, and it looked as though it could sail very swiftly.

The detective gave a quick order to Harnett, and himself sprang to one of the sails.

As soon as the two sails were raised Nick directed Harnett to cast off the rope that was attached to the anchor and throw it overboard; and then, seizing the tiller, he brought the craft around so that the wind filled her sails, and they darted swiftly away.

But they were not an instant too soon.

Even as they filled away, they heard shouts from the top of the ledge they had so lately left, and, looking back, they could see a swarm of men rush out upon it from the cavern.

Instantly the detective seized Talika and forced her to lie down in the bottom of the boat, ordering Harnett to do the same thing; and then he stretched himself prone upon his back and reached up over him to grasp the tiller.

He did not look where they were going; he only watched the sails over him to see that they were kept

full, and so the swift craft darted out of the cove upon the waters of Tokio bay, just as the sun rose over the mountains to the eastward.

A storm of bullets pursued them.

A fusillade of rifle-shots sounded from the hillside back of them and echoed and reechoed again and again along the shores.

One bullet struck the tiller within an inch of the detective's hands; others passed over their heads; others pierced the sails; they could hear the thud-thud-thud of lots of them as they struck the sides of the little vessel, or buried themselves on one or the other of the masts.

But at last they began to fall short, and Nick leaped to his feet to take a better command of the boat that had so fortunately saved them.

The bay was before them now.

Nick could see the lighthouse on the end of the point just below Yokusuka, less than ten miles away, and at the rate they were moving through the water he knew that he would sail into the harbor of Yokusuka within an hour.

It had been a fortunate as well as a magnificent escape—and a wonderful one, as well.

But it was an escape. They were free now, and Maoki could gnash his teeth in all the rage he pleased, it would not avail him.

As they approached the harbor of Yokusuka nearly an hour later they could see a war-vessel—one of the smaller ones—issuing therefrom and making in their direction, and, after watching it for a time, Nick turned to Talika with a light laugh, and said:

"Talika, I will wager a big red apple against one of those ropes of diamonds you wear—what a veritable barbaric queen you do look, to be sure!—that yonder gunboat is going in search of us."

"Do you really think so?" she asked.

"Yes. I sent General Lakatira to the emperor with a message. The general has told his majesty where Harnett and I had gone, and—look! They are signaling. They are heading this way."

"Yes," she replied.

"You see, they have glasses to look at us. They can see your diamonds sparkling. Child, you have a king's ransom on your person now. I am glad you brought them all away with you. They are rightfully yours, because their owner gave them to you; and now you will be a rich young woman, to the end of your days."

It was soon demonstrated that Nick had not been mistaken about the gunboat, for she hove to near them, and when Nick brought his own craft into the wind and laid her in stays, the lieutenant in command of the war-vessel called to them to make sure that it was the party he was seeking.

General Lakatira was upon the deck, too, and stood beside the lieutenant.

In as few words as possible, Nick related the major part of what had occurred during the night; he told how they had escaped from the house of Maoki, and how they had finally made their way through the cavern and found the boat in which they were escaping.

Then Lakatira called out to Nick:

"The emperor commands that you report to him in person immediately upon your arrival in Tokio, and that you take with you Harnett, and Talika, if you have saved her. There is a special engine and car awaiting you at the station in Yokusuka."

"Are you not going, also?" asked Nick.

"No; our work has just begun. I have my orders."

"I suppose you are going after Maoki; eh?"

"Yes."

"You will find him there, general; and there is fortune enough in diamonds and gold in that house of his to build a new battle-ship for your government."

That was all for the time.

Nick removed the gems from the geisha girl and made a bulky package of them.

They found the special engine and car awaiting them when they landed, and that all directions had been given for their reception, and they were whirled over the distance to Tokio in a surprisingly short time.

From the station in Tokio they were quickly conveyed to the palace, where the emperor, apprised beforehand by telegraph, was waiting to receive them, and they were soon in his presence, none the worse for their experiences of the past night.

The emperor looked in amazement upon the jewels once again worn by Talika; then he smiled broadly when told how she had received them.

"They are yours now, Talika," he said, "and henceforth you are to become a member of my own family here at the palace. I only wish that we could keep Mr. Carter here with us, also, but that is, of course, impossible."

Whatever Talika wished about it, she did not say; but she turned her eyes, swimming with tears, full upon him as she replied:

"To him I owe everything: my life, my honor, my happiness, for I am happy now!"

THE END.

The next number (693) will contain "By Order of the Emperor; or, Nick Carter's Special Body-guard."

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

In few walks of life, indeed, does photography not enter largely, and you can easily imagine how indispensable the camera has become in the detection of crime.

"Were it not for the camera many criminals would go scot-free," said a well-known photographer to the writer in the course of a recent conversation. Photography greatly assists the law in detecting fraud and identifying criminals, as by its aid it is possible to make an exact and immediate reproduction of the scene of a crime and its environment, including footprints, finger-marks, writings, and so on.

During recent years the camera has played an important part in trials that have to do with disputed handwritings. Not so very long ago a case that was being tried in the English law courts, and which was giving the judge a considerable amount of trouble, was settled by a camera. The case for the plaintiff rested entirely on the point whether a certain legal document, executed a decade or so before, had two or three signatures. The Judge was of the opinion that the deed had only two signatures at the time of its execution, but at the suggestion of the plaintiff's counsel he had the document photographed. The negative was taken by an official photographer, and when it was developed traces of a third signature were revealed. The negative was thereupon enlarged several times, and it then showed the full name almost as plain as when first written. This evidence was considered sufficiently conclusive, and the plaintiff, thanks to the camera, won the day.

Forged signatures to checks are continually being discovered by the camera. In Paris some time since a well-known lady informed her bankers that a check for a large amount which they had honored had not been drawn by her. The naked eye was quite unable to find anything suspicious of forgery, but when the check was photographed, the signature being many times enlarged, the positive taken from the negative proved beyond a shadow of doubt that the name had first been sketched in pencil, and then covered over with ink. A handwriting expert who was called in discovered one or two characteristics of a noted French forger in the caligraphy of the "lady." He was found guilty on this evidence, and sent to a term of imprisonment.

Doctor Alphonse Bertillon, of Paris, has perfected a system of accurate scientific measurements, knows as anthropmetry. By its aid it is possible to so keep a record of a prisoner that he can be easily recognized from his measurements. This system of measurements is generally supplemented by a photograph or two. A prisoner is taken either with a mirror placed on one side of him, which produces a full face and a profile at the same time, or with two mirrors. The mirrors in the second case are about six feet high, placed at right angles, and produce five simultaneous views of the sitter, who is placed midway between the extended sides of the mirrors.

Finger-marks and footprints are the surest methods of identification, and a mere thumb-mark on a pane of glass by a burglar or other criminal is generally sufficient to warrant a sentence of guilty being brought against him. When Mrs. Tyler, living in Kidbrook Park Road, Blackheath, was strangled to death some years ago the only clue the detectives had to the identity of the murderer was a photograph they had taken of a distinct impression of his thumb left upon a window-pane of the unfortunate lady's house. Photographs of finger-marks have brought many criminals to justice in this and other countries.

To micro-photography the detection of many a crime is due. The spectroscope is infallible in revealing the presence of the minutest trace of blood, but it is unable to distinguish between human and animal blood. The microscope can, however. The corpuscles of different mammalia can only be distinguished by their size and shape, and were it not for the microscope it would be next to impossible to draw a distinction between the blood of a man and the blood of an animal. The evidence offered by the microscope can be brought before the judges of the law courts in photographs, there being cameras made for attaching to the eye-pieces of microscopes, and taking an exact copy, greatly enlarged, of course, of whatever is on their glass slides.

It is interesting to know that an American scientist has invented a camera for use with the microscope which is capable of multiplying an object to be photographed 3,600 times. The camera in its complete state measures about 25 feet in length, and its lens will reproduce the lines of paper as well as its fiber.

The camera makes some curious mistakes occasionally. An amateur photographer, while taking snapshots in a forest, came upon a man holding a knife uplifted above a woman, who was lying on the ground. The photographer snapped the shutters of his camera, and then ran to the assistance of the woman. She, however, was quite dead, having been stabbed to the heart. The supposed murderer was given into custody, and at the trial the photograph taken by the amateur was produced as evidence against him. He would probably have been found guilty had not a medical witness proved that the victim had been dead several hours before

the advent of the amateur photographer on the scene. The prisoner all along had protested his innocence, declaring that he had come upon the murdered woman in the forest just before the photographer had arrived, and that he had taken the knife, which had been found in his hand, from her breast, where it was sheathed to the hilt.

A SCHEME THAT FAILED.

Walter Gray, a clerk in the Central Bank, walked leisurely toward the station one evening, his mind evidently preoccupied. He was speedily recalled to a sense of his surroundings when, crossing a narrow street, he felt a swift wrench upon his watch-chain.

"Hello, you young scamp!" he exclaimed sharply. "What are you up to?"

The "young scamp" did not wait to explain, but, having failed in his object, took to his heels with all the nimbleness of a goat. Unfortunately for him, however, he was not nearly so sure-footed; his toe stubbed against the opposite curb, and down he came an awkward cropper. Before he could scramble up Walter had him by the scruff of the neck. Writhe and wriggle as he might, he could not shake off that sinewy grip.

"You've done me; I'm blown," he gasped, at length, abandoning the attempt. "You'd never have collared me if I hadn't fell over these 'ere busted boots of mine."

The brogues in question were certainly never made for the feet they now partly covered. They were undeniably "busted," and "busted" badly.

"Well," said the lad sullenly, "why don't yer call a perliceman to me? I s'pose that's the next move? There's one a-comin' round the corner—shall I whistle him up for yer?"

"That's precisely what you deserve," returned Walter, smiling in spite of himself.

"Oh, I don't care. I done time afore to-day, I have. Anyways, they don't starve yer in prison like they do out. Now, shall I whistle?"

Walter glanced at the arab's pinched and prematurely aged face—a face that told its own tale of past privations—and his heart softened within him. After a moment's hesitation, he plunged one hand into his pocket and brought out a half-dollar.

"Here you are," said he, releasing his hold. "Go and get something to eat. Only don't try these tricks on again; they're sure to land you in trouble."

"Ah, you're one of the best sort, you are, sir." The boy spat upon the coin for luck. "I wish I could do anythink for——"

"That's enough; now cut!"

And the ragged urchin "cut" accordingly.

A month or so after this display of magnanimity—"a deliberate encouragement of crime," his friends termed it—Walter was called into the board-room of the bank, where the manager and two of the principal clerks were dealing with the morning's correspondence.

"Ah, Mr. Gray," said the manager, looking up from his papers, "you are acquainted with the district around Besford, I believe? Mr. Grayson has written to ask that the jewels which he deposited for safe-keeping in our hands may be sent down to his residence to-day. His wife, I understand, wishes to wear them during certain festivities to be held there. Owing to the illness of poor Jones, who on former occasions has conveyed the valuables to and from the bank, I thought, perhaps, you would kindly undertake the duty in his stead."

Walter readily acquiesced, flattered at being entrusted with so important a mission.

An hour's run by railway brought him to Besford, the nearest railway-station to Mr. Grayson's residence, and about two miles distant therefrom. Contrary to what he had been led to expect, there was neither servant nor conveyance waiting for him at the station; and, while Walter was standing in some doubt as to the course he had better adopt, a young fellow in cycling dress came hurrying across the station-yard toward him. Walter at once recognized the newcomer as Henry Usher, a nephew of Mr. Grayson.

"I say, you're from the bank, aren't you?" exclaimed young Usher eagerly. "I almost missed you. I'd an idea the train wasn't due for half an hour yet. But what's become of Mr. Jones? I thought he would bring the things as usual."

Walter explained how it was that he had taken the place of Mr. Jones for the nonce.

"That's very awkward, you know," Usher added, rubbing his chin perplexedly. "I suppose it's no use my volunteering to take the articles up to the house for you? No, no; of course not. Your instructions are to give them into the hands of my uncle. Quite right, too. Well, you see, when I said I would meet Mr. Jones at the station, I expected to meet Mr. Jones. So I rode over on my tandem bicycle, knowing that he wouldn't mind occupying the other saddle-back. But perhaps you ride a bike yourself?"

Walter laughingly responded that most people did nowadays, and that for his part he would be glad of the chance to stretch his legs.

"Then it's not so bad, after all," said Usher, recovering his spirits. "The machine's just outside the gate, and I've got some trousers-clips handy."

A few minutes later they were spinning along the highway—Walter's cowhide bag, containing the japanned jewel-case, slung from the lamp-hook in front. He himself being the lighter of the two, took the foremost seat.

For over a mile they kept to the highway, afterward turning into a lane, flanked with hedges and overhung by the trees of Besford Woods. Here, on account of the rutty nature of the ground, they had perforce to reduce speed somewhat. Since quitting the main road they had not met a soul; and they were considerably startled, therefore, in rounding a curve in the lane, to find three sinister-looking men planted directly in their path.

"The neighborhood swarms with tramps and blackguards," said Usher. "One is never safe from molestation even in the public roads, and this crew look as if

they meant ugly work. We'd better clap on pace and rush through them."

But when the riders drew abreast of the trio, a handful of sand and turf struck Walter full in the eyes. Blinded by the dust and grit, in intense pain, the cyclists drove up the bank and into the hedge, where the machine collapsed under them.

Two of the assailants flung themselves upon Walter, who, struggling in utter darkness, was quickly overpowered, gagged, and bound by the cords with which the scoundrels had provided themselves. The first object his smarting eyes perceived was young Usher—secured in a like fashion by the third ruffian.

"Lug 'em into the wood," said one of the gang. "We'll finish that job first, and then we'll see what's in the bag. Ha, here comes Luke; he deserves his share; he's kept a good lookout." A lad, in whom Walter identified the would-be pickpocket of a month ago, ran up at this juncture. "Here, Luke, shove this bicycle out of sight behind the bushes, an' help us with these young swells. Their mothers won't see 'em home to tea tonight, I reckon."

The captives were dragged through the brushwood into the thickest part of the wood, where Usher was fastened to a slim pine-tree.

"Best keep 'em apart, so if one gets loose—which isn't likely, I guess—he'll have a hunt for it afore he finds the other," suggested the man who had previously spoken. "Just run through their pockets first, Luke; you're a smart hand at that."

A few hundred yards farther on Walter was also roped firmly to a sapling, and left alone with his thoughts. Assuredly these were none of the sweetest. The gems were gone! And here was he, their trusted custodian, unable to budge hand or foot, helpless as a trussed chicken.

Night, too, was beginning to fall, and Walter wondered how many hours might elapse—how many days even—before any one chanced to come near that sequestered spot. As he was without any means of attracting attention, it was clearly possible that any one might pass within a dozen yards of the place, and yet never see him. The more he pondered his situation, the more hopeless and gloomy did its aspect appear.

As near as he could judge, he had been about two hours in this unenviable position, his limbs fast growing numb, when he heard the snap of a twig close at hand. Again came the sound, and Luke crept stealthily out from the undergrowth.

"They're just a-goin' to the station to catch the train," he said, in a whisper. "I said I'd call as we passed to see as how yer was still fixed up safe, so we needn't be feared."

Walter rolled his eyes; it was about all he could do.

"Yer done the straight thing by me once," Luke added, "so now we're quits. Leastways, we shall be when I've cut these ropes. But afore I do that, you've got to promise as yer won't set the coppers on our track for three hours yet. Then they can catch us if they can. My pals has been good pals to me, and I'm not a-meanin' to leave 'em without a chance. Will yer promise faithful?"

Having no option, Walter agreed to the conditions by nodding his head. A moment later he and his tongue were both free.

"But the jewels!" he cried anxiously. "What has become of them? Can't you manage to get them from——"

"Jew'ls—what jew'ls is them?" rejoined Luke quickly. "Yer don't mean as there was any diamonds in that 'ere bag, do yer? If on'y Blobs an' Mike had knowed that, yer might bet yer bottom dollar they wouldn't have handed 'em over so sharp. Jew'ls was they?"

"Handed them over?" repeated Walter confusedly.

"'Course they did—soft as yer like. Don't you see, sir, it was all a regular blind—a put-up job. That other young gent planned it, an' offered us ten dollars apiece to work it off for him. Bless yer, his eyes didn't catch none o' the sand we threw, nor he wasn't really tied up to that tree. That was part of the fake. And now it's him as has walked off with the bag an' all——"

At this point, in response to a distant whistle, Luke darted away among the trees.

True to the pledge exacted from him, Walter did not attempt to quit the wood before the three hours' grace had expired; then he made the best of his way to Mr. Grayson's house. Usher had also apparently but just arrived; for Walter, on being shown into the library, found him in the middle of a graphic description of the assault and robbery, to the details of which his uncle was listening aghast.

"That such outrages should be possible!" cried Mr. Grayson, with emphasis. "It's disgraceful—scandalous! Yes, Mr. Gray, this is a bad business. The jewels all gone—every one! And who is to bear the loss? The bank must be responsible—I will have legal opinion on that——"

"I hardly think it will be necessary," interrupted Walter quietly. "I think your nephew can prevent any question of that kind arising, if he pleases."

"What's that?" exclaimed Usher, his color changing.

Mr. Grayson looked searchingly at the speaker, whose perturbation grew excessive under the bold, shrewd gaze. Unconsciously, perhaps, though the action was significant, Usher involuntarily passed his hand over the pocket of his jacket.

"What I mean is this," returned Walter, noting the hasty movement, "that the whole affair was under your direction, that it was all a plot to possess yourself of the valuables. I mean that the jewels, taken out of the case, are even now in your pocket."

"A lie—a confounded lie!" cried Usher, white to the lips.

"Be careful, Henry," Mr. Grayson put in sternly. "Your face betrays you. Besides, I haven't forgotten that money-lender's threat the other day. More disreputable debts, I suppose? No doubt Mr. Gray can substantiate his accusations by calling witnesses whom you would not probably care to see."

Indeed, for all the real culprit knew to the contrary, his accomplices might have been in waiting below, as willing now to denounce as they had before been to aid him.

Incoherently mumbling something about "duns and gambling-bets," young Usher drew the loose trinkets, one by one, from his pocket; then, dropping into the nearest chair, he bent his head in despair.

"Pray leave us now, Mr. Gray," murmured Mr. Grayson brokenly. "I would spare you a painful scene. Here is the receipt for the jewels. I will at once give the servants orders to see to your comfort until you are quite ready to be driven back to the station. Sad as this trouble is, but for you it might have been infinitely worse. I can only say—thank you."

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